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The Trouble with Nationalism:
'Englishness' in the Quartets of Britten, Tippett, and Vaughan Williams

by

Sarah Elaine Robinson

A thesis submitted to the
Department of Music at Trinity University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with departmental honors.

22 April 2009

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DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to my parents, Susan and Wes James. Their unwavering and unconditional support has tempered the challenges of taking the road less traveled by. For their encouragement and steadfast confidence in my abilities, I am eternally grateful.

* * *

To my dear Adam I can offer only my sincerest gratitude for suffering through endless months of writing and revising. I am so thankful to have such a loyal best friend who loves me despite my terrible puns.

* * *

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is, in general terms, an examination of the need for nationalism as a defining characteristic in music. Specifically, it deals with a term, 'Englishness', which is thrown lightly about in criticism and biographies by English writers with greater frequency throughout the twentieth century up until the Second World War. Through three quartets written near the end of that war by three vastly different composers, each representing a different variant of 'Englishness' (though all connected back to Purcell) this phenomenon will be dissected. Of particular consideration are the political and cultural atmosphere of England in the 1940s, the overall effects of the war, and a general national anxiety towards a domineering Austro-Germanic tradition. Vaughan Williams' String Quartet in A Minor, Tippett's String Quartet No. 3, and Britten's Quartet No. 2 in C represent three diverse sounds, styles, and forms of a twentieth century quartet which all bear the stamp of 'Englishness'. In contextualizing and analyzing these works and the men who wrote them, a wider picture of English music, the appropriateness of labeling, and trends in the collective British psyche will be explored.

I. THE TROUBLE WITH NATIONALISM

Because of its close association to and dependence on emotion and belief, nationalism is an inherently difficult phenomenon to define and dissect. Like many human emotions, its manifestations are both ephemeral and powerful, irrational and undeniable. These intrinsic contradictions and complexities become heightened at times of war, when peace is threatened and fear is the default state of mind. It is for this reason that the years spanning the Second World War and its conclusion are a particularly potent and polarized representation of nationalistic feeling. Subsequently the existence of musical ‘Englishness’ as a defining musical factor is referenced more frequently during this time of extreme emotion. While the strong feelings that result from conflict present a highly divided and passionate case study, it is also possible to oversimplify these views into mere good versus evil. Rather, nationalism is like a spectrum, with varying degrees of intensity, and as a result the music that comes out of it is equally diverse and complicated. Additionally, musical nationalism is increasingly problematic because of the abstract, indefinite nature of music in general, to say nothing of even more indistinct instrumental genres.

Nationalism is ultimately a phenomenon of the nineteenth century – a result of a waning aristocracy and an increasingly self-aware middle-class. As musicologist Mark Evan Bonds notes, although “national styles began to emerge over the course of the 17th century,” it was not until the nineteenth century in Europe that “more and more peoples began to embrace the idea that their true identity derived from a common language and culture, including shared literary and musical traditions.”¹ Paul Henry Lang notes that the

¹ Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2006), 218; 383.

nineteenth century was “the century which presented the problem of nationalism.”²

What began as a political assertion of self was, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adapted into purposeful musical expression, with varying degrees of directness and success. Bonds identifies this new, often politically charged musical language as one “driven by a desire to return to cultural roots through a musical idiom connected to the people.”³ Into the twentieth century, nationalism in music moved from being identified with peoples of a certain country to representing those of a certain ethnicity or race, regardless of their nation of residence. It is also in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in which nationalism in music came under scrutiny, and the capacity for musical nationalism was questioned.

Yet, it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the presence of nationalism, or its ability to exist in music in general. These points are inconsequential when surveying ‘Englishness’ and its place in musical history – clearly the mere mention of ‘Englishness’ insinuates the belief that nationalism is not only able to be present in music, but that it already is. In any case, these existential questions of regional identity and cultural characteristics are more of a reflection of our present cultural attitude than the music being studied. Particularly in the sometimes stifling atmosphere of the politically correct twentieth and twenty-first centuries, nationalism, and its presence or absence in music, has become dangerous territory. Oversensitivity to national, ethnic, and regional specificity (or, the opposite, and equally ridiculous, insistence on a worldwide, human culture) does more damage than good when considering a musical culture. Rather, when it comes to something as complex and personalized as nationalism, it is often best to use

² Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1941), 938.

³ Mark Evan Bonds, *A History of Music in Western Culture*, 569.

both deductive and inductive reasoning in order to draw particular conclusions. Taking into account both the broad cultural movements of the time and the specific life events of several individuals will hopefully yield a more useful definition and understanding of 'Englishness'.

It is for this reason that three 'English' composers – Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, and Michael Tippett – are being considered, through respective String Quartets written during the Second World War, against the backdrop of the catch-all term 'Englishness'. These three composers, each born and raised in England, represent three distinct voices within the continuum of musical and cultural 'Englishness'.

Vaughan Williams, Britten and Tippett symbolize, respectively, the conservative and patriotic voice of the older generation, the conflict and confusion of an individual at odds with society's norms, and the highly idealistic (if somewhat disconnected) and youthful pacifist. They are represented by their quartets of this era for several reasons. First, and perhaps of least importance, the String Quartet was a common genre which each of these three composers used towards, or after, the end of the Second World War. This allows an equal basis by which to compare each of the three individuals and their perspectives and styles. Second, chamber music, though not exclusively the string quartet, was experiencing a so-called 'Renaissance' due to several factors to be discussed later. Lastly, and most importantly, the quartet is a genre associated with supreme inner expression, free, for the most part, from outside corruption or distortion. Though it remains to be seen precisely how true this assumption is, the string quartet, especially in England, was generally less influenced by commercial interests than, say, opera. For these reasons, analysis and argument will focus mainly on Vaughan Williams' Second Quartet (1942-1944), Britten's Second Quartet (1945), and Tippett's Third Quartet (1945-46).

It should be noted that there is certainly far more to each of these men than their feelings towards their country during this short span of time, and particularly within a single composition. Nationalism and patriotism can be as fluid within a particular individual as between centuries. However, like any good scientific study, musical analysis must also have set parameters and stable controls in order to yield any results worth considering. It is the price to pay for coherent and useful conclusions. By the same token, each of these composers must be considered within an historical, societal and cultural context, which encompasses musical as well as non-musical events taking place outside the very intimate experience of composition. These three composers are a particularly good case study for nationalism in English music, because each, in his own way, consciously attempted to be “of the people,” and to compose for them. Vaughan Williams used folk idiom, Britten reached out through children’s pieces, and Tippett spent his adult life working with amateur musicians. But before delving into the intricate and messy study of ‘Englishness’, it is necessary to understand England during the War. To understand fully the importance of the term ‘Englishness’ for these composers and their contemporaries, the movements and patterns against which they were reacting must be considered.

2. THE END OF AN EMPIRE

Despite the passing of just six short years, England in 1945 was not the England of 1939. Air-raids, which began in the summer of 1940 and continued for several years, had left obvious physical pockmarks on the island, but the deeper psychological scars stayed oftentimes veiled behind a customary stiff upper lip. The British people had, after all, endured war much longer than most of their Allied counterparts. The U.S. entered the war at the end of 1941, more than two years after Britain declared war on Germany, and Canada, though historically involved in numerous foreign military struggles, had never fought a battle on its own soil. Great Britain, on the other hand, was situated dangerously close, and increasingly closer, to the encroaching German front, and her people lived with a daily reality of violence. Certainly terrifying and heartbreaking, the British experience of war was above all complex and irreversible.

If collective memory has any bearing on reality it can be said that the war brought to civilians and soldiers of Great Britain and the Commonwealth a feeling of considerable unity and solidarity. This island nation and its satellite states, comprised of dozens of nationalities and hundreds of languages and cultures, found itself in the 1940s pitted against a greater common enemy: Fascist Nazi Germany. As British historian Jose Harris asserts:

The war is widely regarded as perhaps the only period in the whole of British history during which the British people came together as a metaphysical entity – an entity that transcended the divisions of class, sect, self-interest, and libertarian individualism that normally constitute the highly pluralistic and fragmented structure of British society.⁴

⁴ Jose Harris, "Great Britain: The People's War?," in *Allies at War: the Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1939-1945*, ed. David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball, and A.O. Chubarian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 233.

This is not to insinuate that wartime Britain was a sort of classless utopia – social borders still existed – but rather to note that the war is remembered in generally pleasant nostalgic terms by those who lived through it. The reality of those nearly six years is much more grim: compulsory conscription for men 18-45, evacuations of millions of women and children from urban areas which had become targets for the *Luftwaffe*, waiting in long lines daily for food and supplies, and violent and unrelenting air-raids at all hours. Hunger, fear, pain, and loss became a part of daily life.

Despite the carnage of the real-time occurrence of conflict, the results of the war were far-reaching and, in many cases, socially progressive. Many unemployed citizens, including millions of women, entered into the workforce, militarily and domestically. Social awareness of the less-privileged was also at an all time high. Harris notes that the darker sides of war are “credited with bringing people of all classes together and with opening the eyes of the privileged to the condition of the poor.”⁵ As a result, many civilians began to demand that their government take on new socially responsible tasks in return for the support given during the war. As historian Ashley Jackson states, “People knuckled down to the tasks of war and were resolved to endure its hardships, but many expected political change once it was over.”⁶ And certainly politics in Britain would never be the same after the end of the war, for better or for worse. Post-war British government became at once more localized and more central. Localized because the Second World War is often seen as the end of the worldwide British Empire; centralized because the concerted war efforts gave power to a national government at

⁵ Harris, “Great Britain: The People’s War?,” 234.

⁶ Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon, 2006), 42.

the expense of local officials. During the war this meant that the government had a huge influence over civilian life – namely the ability to enforce rationing and civil service.

These restrictions on everyday life were certainly lessened in 1945, and by some respects normalcy was restored, or at least in the process of returning. Locally, air-raids had become less frequent and poorly focused, despite the isolated terrors of innocuously named “doodlebugs” (German rockets) which fell in the summer of 1944. Internationally, the war had taken a major turn in favor of the Allies. This was a direct result of the addition of the United States at the end of 1941, the continued global British presence despite massive bombings, the Allied bombings of Germany, and increasingly frequent German retreats, particularly on the African Continent. It seemed that after the terrible air-raids of the summer of 1940, the war was finally becoming winnable, and the focus of battle was increasingly close to Nazi headquarters, rather than English cottages. Power had shifted from the Axis to the Allies, and spirits were high, especially after the success of D-Day in June of 1944 and much of England was feeling optimistic about the impending end of the war and an anticipation of returning to prewar life.

Still, for most, this was only a fantasy – life as they knew it was gone. Family and friends were dead, fortunes were decimated, and a war of unforeseen technology had taken the entire world by surprise. The war may have been near an end, but nothing would ever be the same, politically, culturally, or physically. For the British Empire, too, the war had irreversibly and permanently changed the face of a nation. The Empire was not only bankrupt, but it emerged from the war led by the Labour party, which was adamantly pro-decolonization. This political atmosphere allowed a campaign for independence in India to come about and led over the next four decades to the loss of governance over Malaysia, South Africa, the West Indies, Canada, Australia, and New

Zealand, among others. It is this picture of Great Britain – that of an Empire simultaneously at the height of its power and prestige and on the precipice of disintegration – which plays a huge role in the use of ‘Englishness’ in association with contemporary composers. It is also important to remember that while these works were written at the end of the war era, and before England’s colonial losses, the composers lived well beyond this time, and many of their ‘English’ evaluations date from several years, or even several decades, later.

One such post-war historian, Peter Clarke, says of the retroactive perspective of Britain at this time: “the history of twentieth-century Britain threatens to become a history of decline, centred on the question: where did it all go wrong?”⁷ English music was facing the same issues that the English people were, namely: what happened to the omnipotent British Empire? In his 1952 book *A History of Music in England*, Ernest Walker embodies the indignant attitude of post-war England as he argues that “the complacent scorn with which the country of Byrd and Purcell has been almost universally treated up to very recent times is totally unpardonable.”⁸ Walker criticizes most strongly his fellow countrymen, not only for allowing such a travesty to occur, but also for propagating this sentiment, never mind that he himself still references the music of the Purcell as the most representative of England. He observes that “there has been the often strongly marked tendency, that no other country’s artistic history has shown, to neglect and deprecate native work in comparison with foreign, even when the latter is only equally good or even worse.”⁹ It should be noted, however, that even contemporaries of Walker found him over-the-top and felt that his statements should come with certain qualifications.

⁷ Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 3.

⁸ Ernest Walker, *A History of Music in England*, ed. J.A. Westrup (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 395.

⁹ Walker, *A History of Music in England*, 398.

Musicologist Paul Henry Lang, for one, in his biography on Handel, asserts that “Walker’s assertions are so sweeping and extravagant that it would be a waste of space to discuss them. To put it bluntly, he was eccentric, continually inconsistent, and often irresponsible.”¹⁰ It is unfortunate that Walker, in trying to elevate English music to a level of international acclaim, succeeds only in making it look ridiculous and petty in the eyes of at least one international critic.

Thomas Dunhill, who agrees with Walker’s assertion of the unjustified poor treatment of English music, considers it to be the direct consequence of “Handel, the Saxon,” who “came to these shores in 1710 from Hanover on a visit, but remained as a conqueror, holding English musicians in thrall.”¹¹ Hubert Foss in his biography of Vaughan Williams, bemoans the fact that “we cozened Handel... into writing music universally accepted as more typically English than that of our own Purcell.”¹² Lang, for his part, asserts that “for Englishmen to regard Handel as the cause of the blight of their music is self-mutilation.”¹³ He prefers to see the “towering Saxon” in a more positive light, noting that “the truth is that “golden ages” are usually followed by gray periods...and then with the aid of stimulants, sometimes ancient and national, sometimes modern and foreign, it recuperates.”¹⁴ In English literature, however, this perspective does not predominate. In fact, the only readily available instance of an Englishman questioning the advantage of an ‘English’ label is by Dr. Harry Colles. Colles noted in a 1942 article in *The Times* that “nationality has been a snare because it has been a garment

¹⁰ Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 688.

¹¹ Walter Willson Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 197.

¹² Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 154.

¹³ Lang, *Handel*, 697.

¹⁴ Lang, *Handel*, 699.

self-consciously worn.”¹⁵ Most writings in the decades immediately following the Second World War seem to side with Walker and Dunhill and insist upon maintaining the ‘Englishness’ of their country’s leading composers.

It is not so difficult to understand how this attitude, exacerbated by the anger and resentment that the British people felt towards Germany after the Second World War, could “[result] in a movement of considerable strength in the direction of what is somewhat vaguely described as nationalism,” as Walker remarks.¹⁶ As an extreme example of such “nationalism,” Dunhill continues by expressing distrust of the presence of any non-English influences in contemporary works. He argues that “alongside of our amazing abundance of production, we find, as has already been hinted, an equally amazing diversity of character,” noting that, “sometimes this diversity is disquieting.”¹⁷ Dunhill cites two consequences of this suspicious diversity: that any talented English composer would be considered to have merely copied successful foreigners, and the appearance of an “anti-foreign brigade...the leader of which is Ralph Vaughan Williams.”¹⁸ Apparently, for Dunhill either option is distasteful, further supporting his position that English music has found itself in a sort of Catch-22. According to Dunhill, because of Handel’s destructive and permanent squelching of “true” English composers of his time, those who were to come after him were doomed to obscurity and incompetence. In light of these complicated feelings towards nationality and musical tradition as expressed by contemporary writers, as well as the general state of the British Empire, it is understandable how English critics, historians, and composers alike would

¹⁵ Foss, *Vaughan Williams*, 90.

¹⁶ Walker, *A History of Music in England*, 399.

¹⁷ Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 198.

¹⁸ Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 198.

look to their own past for inspiration and strength in an effort to reassert English dominance on a cultural level, if not a political one.

3. 'ENGLISHNESS' THROUGH THE AGES

It is because of Britain's own retrospective self-identification during and after the Second World War that in order to truly hunt down 'Englishness' one must venture at least as far back as the seventeenth century, to Purcell. It seems that whenever an English composer is touted as truly 'English', particularly in the mid-twentieth century, he is compared to Purcell, or charged with copying or alluding to his style or technique, or preferred genre or form. It makes no difference whether this new composer is two or three centuries distanced from Purcell. In fact, it seems to be rather a favorite pastime of English music critics to contrast the contemporary composer to the looming greatness of Purcell's legend and oeuvre. John Herschel Baron sheds some light on this phenomenon by explaining Purcell's importance in English musical history:

Henry Purcell...was the last exponent of the traditional English style [because] he was able to maintain a careful balance between Italian and French ideas and his English heritage. After his death, and even during the decade and a half before, his fellow Englishmen succumbed to foreign styles.¹⁹

Each generation falls prey to the daunting comparison, and as Jeffrey Richards notes, this process is "not unusual, it regularly happens to great composers. Sullivan, Parry, Vaughan Williams and Britten all suffered from it."²⁰ Ironically, the most famous non-English 'English' composer – Handel – also was compared to Purcell. Lang notes that Handel was proclaimed "a direct descendant of Purcell and thus a genuine English composer."²¹ The fact that Handel was not English by birth, and had spent nearly 30 years soaking up dangerous amounts of German and Italian culture, further complicates

¹⁹ John Herschel Baron, *Intimate Music: A History of the Idea of Chamber Music* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1998), 111.

²⁰ Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music* (New York: Manchester University, 2001), 44.

²¹ Lang, *Handel*, 697.

any clear definition of 'Englishness'. Still, it should be noted that although Handel is often considered 'English', no later English composers are compared to him in an effort to establish and legitimize their 'Englishness', probably because of the aforementioned resentment by the English musical elite.

Rather, modern English composers, from Elgar to Tippett, are continually and steadfastly secured to Purcell by critics of their music. Colles writes that "we call the music of Vaughan Williams English because at one moment the style may recall an English folk-song...or the rich freedom of Purcell's declamation."²² In his biography of Gustav Holst, Michael Short likens both Tippett and Holst to Purcell by asserting that:

Perhaps the most significant artistic successor to Holst is Michael Tippett... because he was one of the few British composers to [write] based on a musical heritage stemming from Purcell, rather than being swayed by the lure of the Central European avant-garde.²³

David Matthews continues the parallel by linking Tippett and Britten together by noting that, "as an earlier generation of English composers had gone back to the Elizabethans, so Tippett and Britten of all their predecessors found in Purcell the closest spirit."²⁴ Hans Keller goes even further by asserting that: "with Purcell, Britten has obviously established what in psychoanalysis one would call a superego identification – Purcell, that is to say, is Britten's father."²⁵ Far from advantageous, this recurring and obsessive assessment becomes increasingly bland and meaningless with each repetition. After naming six or eight successors of Purcell's crown, the English musical tradition begins to look more desperate than dynastic. This is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of

²² Foss, *Vaughan Williams*, 90.

²³ Michael Short, *Gustav Holst: The Man and his Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 337-8.

²⁴ David Matthews, *Michael Tippett: An Introductory Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 52.

²⁵ Hans Keller, "The Musical Character," in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works From a Group of Specialists*, ed. Donald Mitchell (Westport: Greenwood, 1972), 320.

defining and understanding ‘Englishness’ as it is employed by (mostly) English writers and critics – there need be no real, tangible, sustainable similarity to Purcell to inherit his majesty and his ‘Englishness’. Instead, it seems that the requirements for Purcellian lineage are simply to be English by birth (though not in the case of Handel), and relatively talented and able to bring England to a musical forefront.

While Purcell is certainly the patriarch of sorts of ‘Englishness’, there are additional uses of the term which do not depend on a Purcellian connection. In fact, ‘Englishness’ is used as a highly fluid term, able to adapt to any need or source, encompassing various connotations from generation to generation, and often within generations as well. Walker acknowledges in his characterization of English music that “the lack of steady continuity is one of the most striking features of English musical history.”²⁶ He, too, returns to the English music of Purcell and Byrd in an attempt to pin down the exact musical characteristics which make a work English. He mentions smooth harmonic progressions and the presence of ‘false relations’, but admits that “it is curious how very many English composers seem to have been totally unaffected by this tendency.”²⁷ There is no mention in Walker’s assessment if unaffected composers were still considered ‘English,’ but one can assume that nationality could not be revoked for disregarding a discretionary practice. If this is so, then either the presence or absence of certain characteristics could indicate ‘Englishness’. In other words, these so-called markers of ‘Englishness’ are neither necessary nor fixed. A piece without any of the traditional signs of ‘Englishness’ can still be called ‘English’, and one with many of them may not be – usually if it is written by a foreign composer. Supporting Walker’s assertion

²⁶ Walker, *A History of Music in England*, 394.

²⁷ Walker, *A History of Music in England*, 390.

of a shifting meaning of 'Englishness,' even while advocating a specific 'English' musical temperament, James Day concedes that "national character, or at any rate our perception of its most obvious characteristics, may change and change radically over the ages."²⁸ This statement is particularly curious when considering the predominance of Purcell references in the literature of twentieth century music. For 'Englishness' to mean the same thing to a modern composer or listener as it meant to one of Purcell's time is not only remarkable – it is improbable.

Yet, there is something to this idea of an 'English' music, even if there is no adequate definition. After all, enough critics have recognized 'Englishness', even if in abstract terms of ambiance, to discuss and reference it on multiple occasions. The difficulty is that they all use it with such calculation and precision, to express with some specificity that which cannot be expressed otherwise, but the term itself is so imprecise. They each must understand what the other means, but never go as far as to extrapolate a possible interpretation. In fact, this term is so widely and vaguely used that Day has dedicated an entire book to the pursuit of defining it. This stands as evidence not only to the presence of this phenomenon, but of its inherently slippery nature. As an example, one need only look as far as the first chapter of Day's *'Englishness' in Music*, aptly titled "What is 'Englishness'." Day is, unfortunately, not able to answer this proposition directly, but rather presents the same questions that are being asked here: "But music? What could possibly be English about that?" he asks at one point. Later he questions if there is "a 'national' element in the purely abstract type of music."²⁹ He rightly insinuates, in his complicated but indefinite answer, that 'Englishness' in a musical sense

²⁸ James Day, *'Englishness' in Music: From Elizabethan Times to Elgar, Tippett and Britten* (London: Thames, 1999), 10.

²⁹ Day, *'Englishness' in Music*, 3.

is inextricably linked to the cultural, political, and geographical notions of ‘Englishness’, and as such is infinitely more ambiguous. This indistinctness is multiplied when affixed to an entity with such an imprecise meaning as an instrumental work.

Day attempts to overcome such vagueness by extracting a definition of ‘Englishness’ from various tangible areas of English life, most notably the language and the geographical and manmade features of the country. He proposes that the monotony of the English countryside could be some representation of, or perhaps catalyst for the unimaginativeness and regularity of the British people. Matthews, too, recognizes that “the English creative imagination is deeply rooted in the countryside.”³⁰ While acknowledging that English music pulls from the same reservoir of musical language as do other Western European countries, Day asserts that “what may be legitimately regarded as English is the manner in which the mechanism of music is exploited to convey a specific message – an emotional or ethical attitude.”³¹ This “attitude,” according to Day, is compiled of “a love of privacy, say, or lack of imagination, of individual self-expression within a framework of regularity, or a feeling of cosiness,” among other things.³² Thomas Dunhill defines this ‘English’ attitude as the representation of “a reticent and undemonstrative race,” noting that “an Englishman does not generally wear his heart upon his sleeve.”³³ Felsenfeld continues by asserting that “if there has been a specifically English strand in the contribution made by such musicians to our culture, we have to look beyond mere tricks of style and technique.”³⁴ But an attitude alone cannot constitute an entire nationality, particularly in music. There must be something

³⁰ Matthews, *Tippet*, 17.

³¹ Day, ‘Englishness’ in *Music*, 4-5.

³² Day, ‘Englishness’ in *Music*, 2-3.

³³ Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 195.

³⁴ Day, ‘Englishness’ in *Music*, 7.

intrinsically 'English' about the music itself, which may or may not translate to a recognizable attitude. Unaccompanied attitude could only possibly make an English performance, and not an English piece. Furthermore, it is unlikely that, given the personalized nature of nationalism, a single 'English' attitude would prevail. To clarify the above stated English attitude, Day includes some ideas of what could be recognized in a piece of English music:

The English might well prefer to work in miniature forms rather than large-scale ones. Emotional expression would be kept well under control, understated but not inhibited in expression. Fun, parody and even ribaldry would be given free rein, but not at the expense of good taste. Majesty and rhetoric would not degenerate into pomposity and bluster. Power would not become violence or brutality.³⁵

Excluding the suggestion of form, there remains no concrete musical traits to give meaning to 'Englishness'. If anything, it seems that 'Englishness' is nothing at all, or rather, the presence of acute moderateness. This musical moderateness is closely associated with the 'Englishness' of politics and culture, with particular reference to England's history as a constitutional democracy and its socialistic tendencies. Humanism and a common inclination to write music that is appealing to and approachable by the general public is cited also as an essentially 'English' trait. Day says in regards to this humanistic past that "It is because they evoked a response not just from the cultured few but from a much wider range of social orders that Purcell, Arne, Elgar and others can be considered as English not only by birth but by character."³⁶ It may be true that these composers had a universal appeal that transcended social status, but they are certainly not the only ones to have done so. Mozart, for example, was and continues to be a favorite of those who know nothing of him and have little or no understanding of music

³⁵ Day, *'Englishness' in Music*, 12.

³⁶ Day, *'Englishness' in Music*, 8.

and his works are never described as primarily 'English'. Still, this definition of 'Englishness' is very risky when considering the music of Britten or Tippett, for instance, both of whom were criticized for being too cerebral or out of touch with the common man, despite their best efforts.

With such a vague definition of 'Englishness' prevailing in the literature, perhaps it is better to focus on the available idea of an 'English' demeanor in an historical and geographical context. Within the context of the history of England, which for the present purposes also implies the history of the United Kingdom, as it has been known since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the question of nationalism, particularly in the last two centuries, has been largely unaddressed. Historians Robert Colls and Philip Dodd even suggest that "the English are patriotic rather than nationalistic."³⁷ The English do not need nationalism and do not like it; they are so sure of themselves that they need hardly discuss the matter."³⁸ If this is true, which it is likely not, then identifying a concrete instance of 'Englishness' in music is all the more complicated, for if an English composer feels fundamentally 'English', there is no point in blatantly pointing it out in every composition. In the same way, an essential 'Englishness' would seep into every work without effort and, presumably, be relatively easy to identify. Britten, too, felt this way about the inevitability of national style. In an article entitled "England and the Folk-art problem" he explains:

It should be obvious that the national character of a composer will appear in his music, whatever technic [sic] he has chosen or wherever his

³⁷ Conversely, Walker argues that due to foreign exchange, the English have a "freedom from the curse of a narrow, jealous patriotism," 398.

³⁸ Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, ed., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Croom Helm, 1986), 2.

influences lie, in the same way that his personal idiosyncrasies cannot be hidden.³⁹

Certainly, this is a tall order for 'Englishness' – to simultaneously reference the inescapable style of each and every composer born in the country. This is especially difficult considering the incredible difference of style between, for instance, Handel and Tippett, or even Vaughan Williams and Britten. For this reason, 'Englishness' is a shifting term, with different embodiments for every generation, and possibly each individual.

Despite all this uncertainty, there do appear to be some relatively unwavering aspects to 'Englishness.' The English language and the English landscape have already been mentioned, but there remains the political culture. The history of the English people shows them to be a relatively tolerant community, particularly in a religious and ethnic sense. Foreigners were always welcome in English courts (to the detriment of English music, as some have argued),⁴⁰ and, at least from an official perspective with only minor exceptions, religious freedom was allowed. In this way, "Liberalism represented English freedom as an ideal force, deep within the national character, and capable of universal dissemination as England's special gift to the world" – liberalism, in the sense of advocating the freedom of an individual, rather than denoting a political party.⁴¹ This concept of liberalism as 'Englishness', which initially seems incongruent to moderateness, is actually representative of an English resistance to interfering too strongly with personal choices, at least relative to the rest of Western Europe. Such tolerance is a result of the Protestant background of the nation, which, theoretically at least, emphasized a personal faith as opposed to the strict doctrine of the Catholic

³⁹ Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 925.

⁴⁰ Baron, *Intimate Music*, 111-117.

⁴¹ Colls and Dodd, ed., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, 30.

Church. The Protestant faith is also considered by Robert Dodd to be an 'English' quality, noting that "the true English were not only free, they were Protestant and free."⁴² But, even overlooking that fact that several other nationalities were also Protestant (lest we forget the Reformation began in Germany), this description is of little help in a musical sense, except in the case of explicitly religious pieces. For instrumental genres, such as the string quartets analyzed here, ties to religion, language and countryside are inherently weak and cannot be reasonably used to support the presence of 'Englishness'.

⁴² Colls and Dodd, ed., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, 29.

4. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Although Vaughan Williams is generally represented as one of the most undeniably and naturally ‘English’ composers (for better or worse), this is usually not evidenced through his quartets. The two numbered string quartets are instead left almost wholly to the side when considering his contributions, either to an international stage or to the English musical scene. Rather, Vaughan Williams has traditionally been condensed and simplified into an ineffectual regional composer, able to turn out pastorals and modal folk-tunes by the dozen, but incapable of serious music. Perhaps critics of his work have left his quartets alone because they reveal a more cosmopolitan side of Vaughan Williams’ personality; perhaps supporters of his ‘Englishness’ cannot use them, for lack of words and folk melody, to bolster his position in English music history. In any case, they, and particularly his final quartet written during the Second World War, represent a facet of Vaughan Williams’ oeuvre which is rarely analyzed, but plays an important role defining not only Vaughan Williams’ own character, but that of ‘English’ music at the time.

4.1. THE HOME FRONT

For Vaughan Williams, the war was a painful reminder of what he had endured as a soldier just a few decades earlier, during the Great War. There was, however, little in his childhood to indicate the life of a soldier. Born in 1872, Vaughan Williams was in his forties when the First World War broke out, and was old enough at the time to avoid service, but he enlisted on his own accord.⁴³ As a young boy, Vaughan Williams had

⁴³ James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

followed his older brother Hervey to preparatory school before enrolling in the Royal College of Music in 1890. Two years later he was accepted to Cambridge where he pursued degrees in music and history. It was not the case that in 1914 Vaughan Williams had no other options than to join the army. Rather, during this time he was busy collecting and organizing folk-songs and had written some of his most representative works, including *A Sea Symphony*, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, *On Wenlock Edge*, and his *Norfolk Rhapsodies*. Despite these accomplishments, and his friends' insistence that he was a greater asset to England when he was at home composing, Vaughan Williams felt that he was not exempt from serving his country.

Because of this experience he knew better than most the chaos that so many young Englishmen were facing each day during World War II. Nevertheless, the pain of wartime loss was no less acute for Vaughan William. Particularly upsetting and difficult was the death of his brother Hervey, in the summer of 1943. It is perhaps the combination of experience and stubbornness, as well as a lifetime commitment to the plight of the English musician, which made Vaughan Williams so starkly nationalistic during the war. Historian and scholar James Day asserts that "he became during the war years a kind of embodiment in music of the wartime spirit of Britain".⁴⁴ But unlike Tippett, who idealistically (and to some, infuriatingly) refused to contribute in any way to the war effort, Vaughan Williams did anything and everything, musical or not, to ensure not only a military success, but a continuation of English quality of life and all possible comfort. Whatever Hitler might send their way, Vaughan Williams would see to it, through farming and gardening and livestock, that he and his would never go hungry. As Ursula Vaughan Williams puts it, "Ralph did many small local jobs. He

⁴⁴ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 79.

helped with the collection of salvage: aluminum for aircraft, paper, rags, and junk of all sorts had suddenly become potential war material.”⁴⁵ He also organized an air-raid shelter with his neighbors and offered the use of his fields to the District Council.⁴⁶

Once the fear in London subsided and musical life began to redevelop, Vaughan Williams jumped right into the middle of it, though he continued his more practical contributions as well. He had no chance to recede to the proverbial ivory tower and escape the omnipresent terror of war – just outside of his home was a deep trench, dug in anticipation of an infantry battle against the Germans, and as Ursula Vaughan Williams notes, “it was horrifying to realize that if it was ever used they would be on the enemy’s side of it.”⁴⁷ Even if Vaughan Williams had had the opportunity to evade life at war and all that it entailed, he would never have done so. He was a staunch supporter of the conflict, and he felt “that in this war the cause had been just, the quarrel honourable,” according to his wife.⁴⁸ Historian and Vaughan Williams biographer Simon Heffer concludes that “once war was declared, against an enemy Vaughan Williams had long since identified as evil, he threw himself into the effort against Hitler.”⁴⁹

4.2. AN ENGLISHMAN

Such nationalistic fervor is hardly unexpected considering Vaughan Williams’ background and temperament; as Heffer notes, “the image we have been left of Ralph Vaughan Williams could only be of an Englishman.”⁵⁰ Growing up in a middle-class household in the late nineteenth century, he learned to play piano and violin and his first

⁴⁵ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W. A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 229.

⁴⁶ Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 9.

⁴⁷ Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 246.

⁴⁸ Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 261.

⁴⁹ Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 97.

⁵⁰ Heffer, *Vaughan Williams*, 1.

lessons were from his Aunt Sophy.⁵¹ It is likely that his abilities and interest in music were fostered primarily because of his mother, who herself had grown up in an atmosphere which encouraged artistic education. His father, who died when Vaughan Williams was only three, had little influence on the composer, and since Vaughan Williams' mother took her children to live with her family her views were the ones he adopted. It is perhaps from his mother, Margaret, that Vaughan Williams gained an appreciation for hard work and egalitarianism, which would later be touted as part of his 'Englishness'.

It is perhaps in early childhood when Vaughan Williams developed a love for naturalness which would later manifest itself in his folk-song studies. He was, however, nearly thirty years old before he encountered English folk-song for the first time. The experience evoked, as Day communicates, "a feeling of recognition, as of meeting an old friend, which comes to us all in the face of great artistic experiences."⁵² This hearing certainly moved Vaughan Williams, for he spent much of the early twentieth century doing field research and documenting the "pure" folk music that he encountered in the countryside. He, like Tippett and Britten to a certain extent, held the idealized view that natural, organic music could be found in an idyllic non-urban setting. He called folk music "unpremeditated and therefore of necessity sincere."⁵³ In reality, his perceptions were highly romanticized, and by the time that he was able to notate these songs, urbanization was already occurring at an exponential rate and the unadulterated folk songs had been corrupted by metropolitan forces. Still, this love for the untouched countryside and its associated music remained strong – he would address it at length in

⁵¹ Vaughan Williams, R.V.W., 13.

All further biographic information taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

⁵² Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 9.

⁵³ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 40.

his writings on national music – and was perhaps one of the reasons that he and wife Adeline offered to house displaced persons during the war.

In a direct way this belief in a simple life and a natural music pervaded his style, and he was conscious to remain the people's composer. According to Day, "he continued to stress that the composer should not live in an ivory tower" and he preferred that his music be listened to. What irritated him to no end were "observations to the effect that the average Englishman hated English music."⁵⁴ This was perhaps a force which motivated him to become involved with the Folk Song Society, a club which attempted to legitimize the plight of the modern English composer. Because of these actions – his attempts to be of the people, and his contributions to folk music – he has been chided by some writers as narrow or xenophobic. Vaughan Williams disagreed, writing in his publication *National Music and Other Essays*:

We may be quite sure that the composer who tries to be cosmopolitan from the outset will fail, not only with the world at large, but with his own people as well. Was anyone ever more local, or even parochial, than Shakespeare?

Through this quote, and many others like it in this writing, it is clear that sincerity and authenticity were the most valuable characteristics of music, and that he felt his music, by virtue of its 'Englishness,' was necessarily both.

4.3. FOR JEAN ON HER BIRTHDAY

Vaughan Williams began work on his Second Quartet in 1942, after repeated requests by friend Jean Stewert, who played viola in the Menges String Quartet. She had urged "Uncle Ralph," as he was affectionately known among friends, to pursue the genre

⁵⁴ Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 53.

once more. It had been more than thirty years since his Quartet in G Minor, and in this respect Vaughan Williams found himself in the same position as Britten and Tippett when writing their Second and Third Quartets, respectively. Stewert received the first two movements for this new string quartet on her birthday that year, though with their dark insistency they must have seemed a strange gift. Two years later Vaughan Williams completed the final movements, and on October 12, 1944 his Second Quartet was premiered on his 72nd birthday at the National Gallery – a clever birthday gift to both Stewert and Vaughan Williams.

This Second Quartet, by virtue of its chronology, is generally considered to be a more natural or genuine attempt than the G Minor Quartet, written in 1908. Day writes that in the A Minor Quartet, there is the added mastery of over thirty years' further exploration and development of a fully-formed highly personal idiom."⁵⁵ This quote hints at some of the criticism that the First Quartet endured – namely that, because Vaughan Williams had just returned from composition studies with Ravel, this quartet was too 'French'. Day relates the sentiment of the time, noting that "commentators were eager to spot French influences, subconsciously fearing, perhaps, that ...Vaughan Williams might have returned from France 'an absolute monsieur'."⁵⁶ Because of this reaction, criticism of his First Quartet is overly harsh and apt to point out Ravelian influences, but this gradually fades with time. Another possible reason that the Second Quartet is, knowingly or subconsciously, considered to be more idiomatic, is because of the recycled use of themes. The Scherzo employs a theme from the film music for *49th Parallel* which opened in 1939, and the Epilogue, subtitled "Greetings from Joan to Jean" uses melodies

⁵⁵ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 244.

⁵⁶ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 237.

from film music for an unmade movie about Joan of Arc. In this sense, rather than using another (foreign!) composer for inspiration, Vaughan Williams is using himself.

A final consideration must be taken when studying this piece, even superficially: the role of the viola as leader throughout the quartet. As Howes notes, “in all four [movements] the viola has the first statement of the theme and is virtually leader of the consort in place of the first violin as in normal quartet writing.”⁵⁷ Particularly important within this quote is Howes subtle reference to a “consort,” a term which certainly evokes images of Purcell’s era. While it can certainly be argued that in this particular case, the viola’s prominence within the quartet has something to do with the fact that Vaughan Williams wrote this quartet for violist Jean Stewert’s birthday, there are other factors at work. On a personal level, some critics claim that the viola played a special role for Vaughan Williams, and his music, including the Second Quartet, reflects this. Foss asserts that “the incidence of viola tone in Vaughan William’s works...cannot be missed by those who have ears,” though he does not discuss this aspect in depth.⁵⁸ As a wider consideration, renewed attention for this sometimes overlooked instrument seemed to be gaining strength throughout England. Herbert Antcliffe, who was very involved in the growing chamber music scene in the early nineteenth century writes the following:

The viola is an instrument that has been sadly neglected and ill-treated in the past, and it is to the credit of many young British composers and executants that it is taking its place as the equal of other instruments.⁵⁹

If this was the case in 1920, when Antcliffe’s article was published, then by 1942, when Vaughan Williams began work on the Second Quartet, this movement would have been in full swing. This may also be evidence of Vaughan Williams’ concentrated effort to

⁵⁷ Frank Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 218.

⁵⁸ Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 171.

⁵⁹ Herbert Antcliffe, “The Recent Rise of Chamber Music in England,” *The Musical Quarterly* 6/1 (January 1920), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738096>, 21.

continue cultivating an ‘English’ style – through the featured prominence of an often ignored voice. In any case, it is certain that Vaughan Williams deliberately wanted the viola to stand out as the guiding voice in this quartet. At nearly every entrance, the score displays the word “solo” notably above the viola part. Even the very first entrance at the beginning of the first movement is marked as such. This is particularly ironic and forceful for two reasons: the viola is playing unaccompanied here, and this is a string quartet – every entrance is a solo because there is only one player per part. Assuming that Vaughan Williams was aware of these two aspects, his deliberate marking of solo assures that there be no argument among players as to who is carrying the predominant melody. It is likely that he realized that without this clear, marked intention the possibility remained that during performance the first violin would return to its customary role and the themes – often in the low register of the viola - would be drowned. Through this marking, Vaughan Williams guarantees that the themes will be heard when introduced and the resulting form will be clear.

4.4. STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR

Vaughan Williams’ Second String Quartet is, particularly for its time of composition, a work of distinct conservatism. The first page alone, with its defiant assertion of a “String Quartet in A Minor” is reminiscent of a quartet come fifty years too late. To be sure, the four movements (also a measure of convention) are tonal, and the Epilogue is pure, diatonic F Major. The movements are linked together through the leading melody of the viola, which introduces each new theme, and the other three voices follow at a slight delay. At first glance, the overall form of the quartet is also traditional:

Figure 1: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 1st mvt, m. 1-9.

STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR
FOR JEAN ON HER BIRTHDAY
R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

**I
PRELUDE**

Allegro appassionato ♩ = 100

VIOLIN I

VIOLIN II

SOLO

VIOLA

VIOLONCELLO

The musical score is written for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is A minor (three flats). The time signature is 4/4. The tempo is Allegro appassionato, 100 beats per minute. The Viola part has a 'SOLO' marking in measure 1. The score shows the first nine measures of the piece, with the Viola playing a melodic line and the other instruments providing harmonic support.

a quick, sonata form first movement, a slow second, a scherzo third, and a finale.

Vaughan Williams' treatment of these sections, however, is unexpected and ironic.

The first movement, Prelude, is in sonata form, but deals mainly with the first theme, introduced by the viola at the start of the piece (Figure 1). Even in the initial statement of the first theme, expectations of rhythmic and harmonic stability are shattered. Although the piece is clearly labeled "in A Minor" and the key signature agrees, the melody begins on an E, slowly gaining momentum until the third measure, where it slides to an A Flat. In fact, the first A of the entire piece is not until measure 18, and in the second violin – the viola continues stubbornly repeating A Flat. The second theme, too, entering at measure 34, shows no signs of A Minor, but rather tonicizes D Flat before moving into a development of the first theme. Even the recapitulation of the first theme at measure 80 avoids A Minor, settling instead momentarily for C Phrygian.

Figure 2: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 1st mvt, m. 72-78.



In fact, the only true moment of arrival into A Minor comes at the very last chord of the movement. The first violin wiggles, unsupported, up to a tentative, sustained G Sharp before finally reaching an A, just as the movement fades away into silence (Figure 2).

This delicate, translucent feel is sustained throughout the second movement, Romance, as is Vaughan Williams' penchant for the unforeseen. This is certainly one of

the least romantic Romances – both due to the filmy, sheer sound of the *senza vibrato* strings, and the resulting archaic, viol-like timbre. As Frank Howes writes, “Romance for Vaughan Williams is free from erotic emotion and seems rather to signify something nearer to a tenderness for all humanity, which superficially seems almost religious.”⁶⁰ If this was indeed Vaughan Williams’ aim, he accomplishes it well through the opening, led once again by the viola, through his omission of the leading tone during the initial statement (Figure 3). This modal-sounding melody, with the addition of the ghostly viol

Figure 3: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 2nd mvt, m. 1-9.

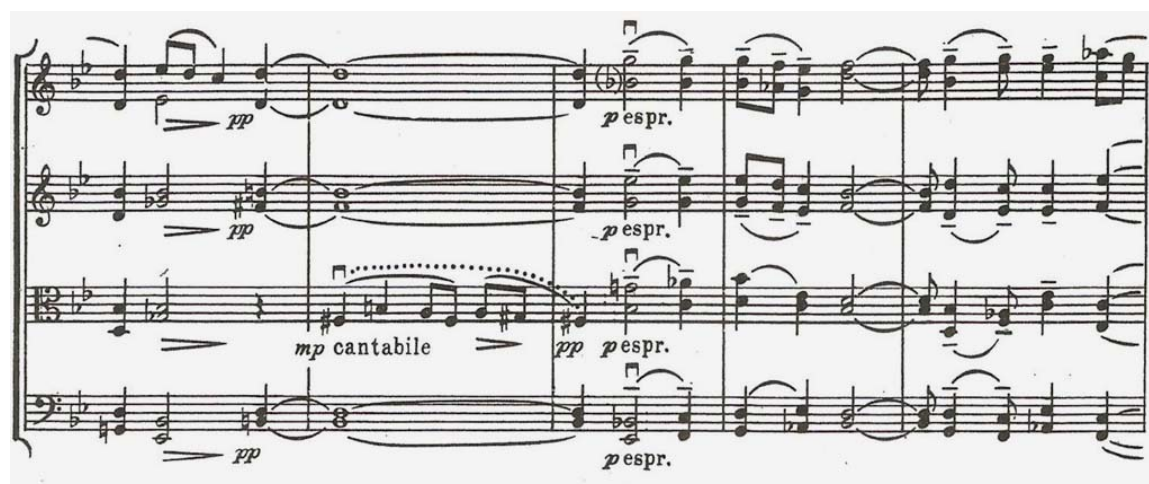
The image displays a musical score for the String Quartet in A Minor, 2nd movement, measures 1-9, by Vaughan Williams. The score is written for four parts: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked 'Largo' with a quarter note equal to 56 beats per minute. The key signature is A minor, indicated by three flats. The time signature is 4/4. The Viola and Violoncello parts are marked 'SOLO' and 'pp senza vibrato'. The Violin II part is marked 'SOLO' and 'pp senza vibrato'. The Violin I part is marked 'SOLO' and 'pp senza vibrato'. The score shows a modal-sounding melody in the Viola and Violoncello, with the Violin II part providing a counter-melody.

sound of the strings and the simple rhythmic feel, all add up to a chant-like atmosphere which could be interpreted as religious in nature. Day adds that “the music seems to have

⁶⁰ Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 219.

strayed into yet another unknown region where the stars twinkle pitilessly out of the musical equivalent of outer space.”⁶¹ This mood is solidified when, around measure 30, the strings are instructed to play *espressivo* and the texture thickens. Each instrument is playing double stops – perfect fifths for the cello and sixths in the upper voices (Figure 4). If any portion of this quartet deserves to be described as ‘English’, it would be this section – Vaughan Williams’ deliberate referencing of the sweet triadic sound of the *contenance angloise* is noticeable. An obscured meter enters here and continues throughout the movement, introducing a triplet figure which leads directly into the Scherzo.

Figure 4: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 2nd mvt, m. 26-30.



The transition from the second to the third movement is perhaps the most clever of the work – the viola returns to finish the theme it began, and, on the same note, introduces the theme of the Scherzo (Figure 5). This theme is carried by the viola alone for the first twelve bars. The other three instruments provide support in the form of tremolo harmonies and triplet figures, but seem to be at odds with the viola throughout the movement. By the time the triplet figure has come to dominate the other three voices,

⁶¹ Day, Vaughan Williams, 244.

in measure 36, the viola introduces the second theme, in duple meter. At measure 44, when this theme is played in unison octaves by the cello and violins, the viola returns to triplets. Finally, at measure 67, the viola breaks away and leads back into the first theme, and then to the end of the piece. In this sense, the overall form of this movement is more follow-the-leader than anything else. Howes, too, asserts that there is “no formal resemblance to the normal scherzo and trio” in the Scherzo.⁶² In fact, despite the light

Figure 5: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 3rd mvt, m. 1-4.

Allegro (♩ = 150)

con sord.

sul pont. *p* trem.

con sord.

sul pont. *p* trem.

(Theme from '49th Parallel')

f (senza sord.)

pp

con sord.

sul pont. *p* trem.

nature of the title, the movement lacks any feeling of merriment. This is perhaps because of the melody's origins in the film music for *49th Parallel*, which Vaughan Williams notes in the score (Figure 5). The film, which had obvious overtones of nationalistic propaganda, tells the fictional story of a group of Nazis invading Canada, realizing their impending defeat, and searching for refuge. The antagonistic atmosphere of the film score is translated into this movement as well.

If the third movement is overly aggressive, the final movement, Epilogue, more than makes up for it with 65 measures of restful, diatonic peace. As Howes asserts, “the

⁶² Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 222.

texture is clear; there is not a single accidental in the whole movement, except a passing G sharp in the second violin.”⁶³ Day agrees, qualifying that the “final hard-won serenity is the outcome of a dour and relentless struggle” of the first three movements.⁶⁴ Yet, even the calm, unapologetic Epilogue and its tranquil ending show no return of the promised A Minor. The last sixteen measures are, rather, a long preparation for a soft landing in D Major (Figure 6). One must question Vaughan Williams’ motives here – is he playing a trick on the listener, or is it an inside joke with Jean Stewart? It is possible that the labeling is symbolic of a larger statement: that one does not always get what is promised. One possible explanation for this quartet’s progressive tonality is that it was written over several years. Normally two years is not such a long time, but during a war, fought

Figure 6: Vaughan Williams. String Quartet in A Minor, 4th mvt, m. 46-51.



on one’s own soil, two years can be a lifetime. Considering, too, that in 1942, when Vaughan Williams began the quartet, Britain was suffering from crippling air raids and seemed to be losing the war. By 1944, when he completed this work, Britain and the Allies had completely turned the tables and were engaged in aggressive air raids on the

⁶³ Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 224.

⁶⁴ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 243.

Continent and Germany in particular, and they seemed to be winning and close to a victory. By the end of 1944, the finish line was in sight and the collective national spirit was high. Perhaps this is indicative of the change in mood throughout the quartet. The tentative, wandering beginning, the haunting Romance, the militaristic Scherzo and the “hard-won” peace and calm of the Epilogue could be programmatically symbolic of the war fought and Vaughan Williams’ anticipated serene finish. Yet, all of these answers are only speculation. What is certain is that Vaughan Williams deliberately identified his Second Quartet with this particular key, and took pains to make sure it would stay that way. The inside cover of the Oxford University Press score notes the following: “When this work is performed, the full title, including the dedicatory underline, should be printed on programmes.”⁶⁵

Perhaps Vaughan Williams’ insistence that his Second Quartet be known always as “in A Minor” was a further attempt to separate his work, an ‘English’ composition, from the wayward atonality of central Europe – a descendant of the Austro-Germanic tradition. As a member of the generation before Britten and Tippett, Vaughan Williams was part of the environment which would generate a great deal of the beginnings of ‘Englishness’, or at least its augmentation. He felt acutely, as his good friend Holst recalls, according to James Day “they didn’t seem to fit on to the great Austro-German tradition at all. But they were at a loss to know how to re-establish the tradition from which they felt they belonged.”⁶⁶ Certainly the war only aggravated these feelings. Even during the First World War, as Day writes:

There was a sad feeling in many quarters that in some way the Germans had let down not merely their friends and admirers in Britain, but their

⁶⁵ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *String Quartet in A Minor* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947).

⁶⁶ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 27.

own noble and high-minded heritage. It seemed impossible that the culture that had produced Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms could be the same as that which unleashed the terrors of chemical and unrestricted submarine warfare.⁶⁷

A Second World War against the same culture could only have reinforced a musical divide for Vaughan Williams between himself and the Germanic sound, resulting in a stubbornly A Minor piece (which rarely reaches A Minor).

It is no secret that Vaughan Williams was the greatest advocate for his own 'Englishness', despite how it may have affected his contemporaries' opinions of him. As James Day notes, "he was also proud of the fact that he was – sometimes disparagingly – referred to as a 'folky' composer."⁶⁸ Certainly, Vaughan Williams wrote in a style that is historically and undoubtedly known as 'English'; his deliberate use of modality and folksong, and a propensity for first-inversion chords reminiscent of the Renaissance *contenance angloise* add to this perception. And, as Simon Heffer writes, this would result in Vaughan Williams becoming "a symbol – in the view of many, the ultimate symbol – of the great renaissance in English music."⁶⁹ There is, however, complexity even within the seemingly irrefutable 'Englishness' of Vaughan Williams' music; ubiquitous labeling of his music as 'English' does not eradicate the problem of 'Englishness', but only exacerbates it. In deliberately creating and propagating an 'English' style (perhaps in an effort to overcome perceived musical and cultural ambiguity), which was so dependent on old techniques, Vaughan Williams, along with others, contributed to an identity crisis that would continue to define English musicians for decades to come.

⁶⁷ Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 39.

⁶⁸ Day, *Vaughan Williams* 19.

⁶⁹ Heffer, *Vaughan Williams*, 3.

5. TIPPETT

Of these three composers, Michael Tippett contributed most prolifically to quartet music, writing four numbered quartets throughout his life, and two additional ones early in his career. Despite this involvement in the genre, it is opera and choral works for which Tippett is most well known. Among the general educated public it is his opera *A Child of Our Time* which had the most recognition. In this respect, he is very much like Britten, whose wartime opera *Peter Grimes* catapulted him into fame. Tippett's lifetime work with amateur choirs, like those at Morley College, also yielded a plethora of choral and vocal works which are more often performed than his quartets and chamber music. But, when searching for the genuine Tippett during the Second World War, there seems no better place to look than in his quartets. His first three quartets were written rather close together, from 1935 to 1945, and the Second and Third were both within the span of the war. As a result, the first three quartets are generally seen as a group, with the fourth separated by more than three decades. Tippett's quartets, and particularly the final three, seem also to play the role of respite in Tippett's chronology of compositional activity. Each was composed directly after finishing a massive piece – the Second after *A Child of Our Time*, the Third after his Symphony No. 1, and the Fourth after his Symphony No. 4. It is, however, not this side of Tippett's personality which is generally stressed. Even more than for his operas and choral pieces, he is most often known for his political antics and ideological perspectives.

5.1. CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

Tippett, most of all, has suffered from being caricatured and simplified into a radical, liberal pacifist who turned his back on England in favor of uncompromising ideology. But he began life much like any other middle-class boy – with lessons in Latin and music.⁷⁰ Tippett left his family home in 1914 to follow his older brother, Peter, to Brookfield Preparatory School where he continued piano lessons. In 1918 he won a scholarship to Fettes College, which he attended for two years until his parents withdrew him after learning of some disturbing sexual tendencies prevalent among the students. After a traumatic ordeal which resulted in a less-than-honorable dismissal of the school's headmaster, Tippett enrolled in Stamford Grammar School, where he stayed until 1923. At this time he was accepted at the Royal College of Music and began work on his Bachelor of Music. Upon completion, though he promised his parents that he would pursue a doctorate, Tippett instead decided to compose full-time. He moved to Oxted, where he would remain until 1951, and began writing and working with amateur choirs. It is during his time in Oxted that Tippett was most politically active. One reason for this radicalization is that Oxted afforded him the opportunity to understand and observe life outside the boundaries of the educated middle-class. Living in close proximity to extreme poverty provoked Tippett to do two things: increase his fervor in training working-class ensembles, and begin reading the works of Marx and Trotsky. It is because of Trotsky that Tippett was persuaded to join a Communist society, and one of the reasons that he is so often portrayed as a radical leftist.

⁷⁰ Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1984), 10. All further biographical information taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

There is much more to his character than this, but it would do little good to discount completely this history of perception, particularly as most of these critics were English themselves. Vaughan Williams, for one, found Tippett's "pacifist views entirely wrong," but respected his fortitude and what a "distinct national asset" his compositions could be.⁷¹ Certainly for the time period disagreeing with the war was unpopular and dangerous. British historian Jose Harris says of pacifism during the war:

Anyone familiar with the private archives of the period cannot fail to be struck by how unusual it is...to find expressions of the view that the war was not worth fighting or that Britain should seek a negotiated peace.⁷²

Interestingly, it seems that most of Tippett's musical peers, like Vaughan Williams, were reluctant to publicly denounce him, because of the great musical talent they recognized. Considering, too, the British propensity for pithy understatement, Adeline Vaughan William's declaration that Tippett was a "thorough going fanatic" would have been considered quite brash.⁷³

Although Tippett's views were complex, and his pacifism was only a part of his character, it is true that perception is reality to a certain extent, and even after his death he has been unable to escape this bias. This opinion, however, illuminates the contemporary atmosphere in England, to which Tippett was exposed and in which he lived, more than it does any features of Tippett's personality. He was, in truth, much more paradoxical than first glance might allow. Though he did join the Communist Party briefly in the 1930s, his views were much more Trotskyist than the Party allowed and as a result he left after a short while.⁷⁴ Resiliently pacifistic, Tippett spent three months in jail for conscientious objection in 1943, at the height of combat, refusing to contribute in

⁷¹ Vaughan Williams, R.V.W., 255.

⁷² Harris, "Great Britain: The People's War?," 245.

⁷³ Vaughan Williams, R.V.W., 255.

⁷⁴ Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 31-2.

any way to the war effort. As Ian Kemp notes, “he did not believe ends justified means nor that war could bring a moral gain.”⁷⁵ Though he was allowed to remain a civilian, Tippett rejected alternate court orders which he felt would play any role in the war, even helping starving and wounded civilians and soldiers. This refusal in particular must have infuriated his contemporaries. Ideals are one thing, but complete defiance of aid must have been considered extreme, particularly at a time when so many others were sacrificing much more than just ideals.

Tippett’s extreme measures of pacifism and his active decision to neglect the suffering of fellow countrymen are interesting, considering his history of humanistic endeavors. After leaving the Royal College of Music, he worked only with amateur musicians, “far from what he considered the potentially stifling atmosphere of professional music,” as Kemp notes.⁷⁶ He also wrote much of his music up until the late 1903s, including *War Ramp* and *Miners*, for the “common” man. Around 1937, though, he realized that he “no longer believed that musical propaganda could do anything to improve [the] position” of the working class.⁷⁷ In fact, “it gradually became apparent to him that politically orientated music had little appeal to those for whom it was written.”⁷⁸ Like Vaughan Williams and Britten, Tippett’s fascination with the plight of the working man extended far past a superficial use of folk idiom. Also like these two composers, he came from an upper-middle class background and never experienced for himself the “common” or “natural” life that he so adored. This romanticization of peasantry was, ironically, never realized as Tippett spent his entire life quite comfortably

⁷⁵ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 42.

⁷⁶ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 17.

⁷⁷ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 34.

⁷⁸ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 34.

funded by his wealthy hotelier parents. Tippett idealized the life of a simple man, but never lived it. His music is also not written for the common performer, but rather required a professional, or a talented amateur at the very least. It is probably a combination of these reasons which kept his music from reaching those for which he intended it. His style, unlike his Marxist purpose, was too far cosmopolitan and international to have any real meaning for a simple, secluded Englishman.

5.2. TO MRS. MARY BEHREND

Tippett's Third Quartet is one such example of byzantine writing, too intellectual for the common man. Indeed, many critics shy away from analyzing Tippett's quartets because of their intricate nature and convoluted harmonies. Most tend to focus on overall impressions, rhythmic motifs, and form. Of the context for creation little is said – the Third Quartet was commissioned by Mary Behrend (who also commissioned Britten's Second) and it was premiered October 19 of the following year at Wigmore Hall. Tippett, too, seems to write very little to friends during this time about his work on the quartet. In June 1945 he writes to Douglas Newton that "I'm really pleased with the new 4tet."⁷⁹ It seems though, that this satisfaction was a long time coming. In a 1943 letter to Newton, Tippett reveals frustration at the fact that he is not yet finished composing. He confesses, "I desperately need to get the 4tet [String Quartet No. 3] out of the way and clear the air for the next big birth."⁸⁰ It seems then, that Tippett was either commissioned by Behrend in 1943, or he had already some idea of a quartet and her offer came later, as a means of speeding up the process, or allowing a premiere. Either way, the dedication to Behrend remains clearly imprinted on the score.

⁷⁹ Tippett, Michael, *Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*, ed. Thomas Schuttenhelm (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 182.

⁸⁰ Tippett, *Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*, 160.

5.3. STRING QUARTET NO. 3

Tippett's Third Quartet is, of the three works discussed, the most unconventional in form, texture, and treatment of the strings. It consists of five moments, with the first, third, and fifth movement being fugues, or having fugue-like characteristics, and the second and fourth a sort of extended fantasy form. Overall there is a stark contrast between rhythmic freedom and rhythmic stability, as evidenced even in the first page of the initial movement (Figure 7). Generally speaking, critics view this quartet as highly influenced by Bartók's writing style and interpretation of what a string quartet could sound like. Kemp relates that this is so evident in the Third Quartet in particular, because Tippett had "in the meanwhile heard all the quartets of Bartók, [and] he changed his attitude to the quartet medium."⁸¹ In this sense, though the Third Quartet is chronologically linked to the first two quartets, it is, in style and method, linked to Tippett's later works. Kemp continues by noting how, despite being affected by Bartók's technique, Tippett did not copy his sound, writing:

Bartók's influence was far more subtle, and an illuminating example of how one composer's influence on another is at its most profound when transmitted in terms of idea rather than stylistic mannerism.⁸²

Similar connections were made between Tippett and Bruckner, Hindemith, Beethoven and Purcell, among others – it is not that his music sounds like theirs, but in some abstract way, critics associate their approach to composition. Perhaps one reason for this is Tippett's compositional style, which is, particularly in the Third Quartet, difficult to break through and fully comprehend. One of the best ways to attempt to understand

⁸¹ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 191.

⁸² Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 191.

Figure 7: Tippett. String Quartet No. 3, 1st mvt, m. 1-10.

to Mrs Mary Behrend

String Quartet No. 3

Michael Tippett

1.

Grave e sostenuto (♩ = c.100)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

4

8

1

sotto voce

Tippett's music is to compare him to other composers whose music is more accessible. Kemp exhibits this by exploring a Beethovenian connection: "Tippett's music is inward-searching. It is music, like Beethoven's, of effort and strain: strain is part of its expression."⁸³ Interestingly, this presence of "effort and strain" is similar to 'Englishness' in that it cannot be easily disproven; it is always easier to prove the existence of something than its absence, particularly when it is only an essence. In this sense, it is possible to compare someone like Tippett, who was not overly influenced by Beethoven (at least not more than any other composer facing a string quartet), to some of the world's greatest composers. This comparison could then act as a legitimization, similar to the Purcell connection, and bolster one of England's freshest composers in a spot of international acclaim.

Yet, despite these comparisons, Tippett certainly has his own style, clearly evidenced in his Third Quartet. Otto Karolyi describes it as:

Energetic vigour and an ability to write "fast" music, preoccupation with complex rhythmic ideas, polyphonic texture, lyricism, and a tendency to incorporate the popular, that is, folk tunes and jazz in a highly sophisticated, modernistic idiom.⁸⁴

With the notable exception of folk music, all of these aspects are present in Tippett's Third Quartet, and support the assertion that this work is an example of Tippett's style. The first movement, for example, though slow at the beginning, soon gathers speed through the rhythmic figure evident in Figure 7 and launches into a fast, chaotic section which defines the rest of the movement (Figure 8). Indeed rhythm is one of the only unifying aspects of this movement, for there is no sign of sonata form. The movement

⁸³ Ian Kemp, *Michael Tippett: A Symposium on his 60th Birthday* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 180.

⁸⁴ Otto Karolyi, *Modern British Music: The Second British Musical Renaissance – From Elgar to P. Maxwell Davies* (London: Associated University Press, 1994), 92.

begins with a slow introduction, which Kemp asserts is “coloured with the vital desperation of the blues and the more anguished moments in Purcell.”⁸⁵ In a bit of striking similarity to Vaughan Williams’ Second Quartet, it is the viola which introduced the rhythmic figure of the movement. That, however, is where the similarities end, for

Figure 8: Tippett. String Quartet No. 3, 1st mvt, m. 13.



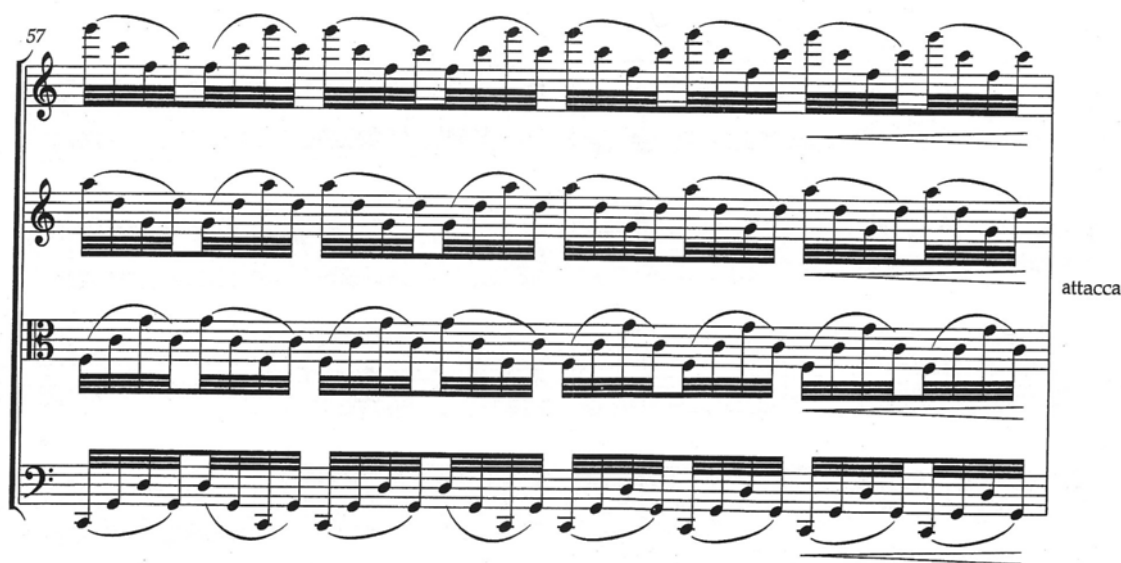
after a peaceful introduction, Tippett turns not to the old string quartet staple, sonata form, but instead to a fugue, based largely on scalar melodic patterns and repetition, as seen above.

The texture of the Andante is much clearer, beginning with the viola once again carrying the melody above cello pizzicato, before handing off to the violins, at the top of their register. Throughout the movement the first violin remains rhapsodically unaffected by the double-stop fifths in the cello, yielding only at the end to the viola. The fourth movement, which follows another fugue, continues the obscured rhythms of this second movement. Quick divisions of the beat into duplet and triplet figures intersperse slower sections, playing up the rhythmic pattern of the introduction. This same rhythmic subject slowly unfolds into 32nd-note configurations which lead to the fifth movement

⁸⁵ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 92.

without pause (Figure 9). The result is that the final twenty bars, which enter at the original tempo and become increasingly energetic, act as sort of a coda, or a prelude to the fifth movement, rather than the finale of the fourth. Kemp, in perhaps another

Figure 9: Tippett. String Quartet No. 3, 4th mvt, m. 57.



attempt to make sense of a quartet complex in form and tonality, sees this continuation, and indeed the entire quartet, in metaphorical terms, asserting a narrative strain throughout the work:

The first movement depicts birth and childhood, the second early experiences of love, the third the vigorous prime of life, the fourth questions of the meaning of life, the fifth an apparent anti-climax or compromise, which eventually is shown to be rich and rewarding.⁸⁶

Again, this is an example of an analysis that simultaneously resists invalidation and elevates Tippett's work to a metaphysical level. It is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to go measure by measure through this quartet and disprove a narrative strain. There is, however, no obvious story-like aspect throughout these five movements.

⁸⁶ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 191.

Additionally, there is no undeniable ‘Englishness’ in this quartet, despite Kemp’s evaluation of blues and Purcell, presented earlier. Rather, it seems likely that Kemp, a Tippett biographer and analyst, was, intentionally or unintentionally, attempting to do what writers and historians in England have been doing for dozens of years: to present a composer of English birth and significant talent as a continuation of an ‘English’ style. This is in part to legitimize the composer, and in part the tradition. Kemp, however, does this subtly by contrasting Tippett with Vaughan Williams and presenting him as the new symbol of ‘Englishness’ who has connections to Purcell but a cosmopolitan viewpoint. He notes that Tippett felt Vaughan Williams, who by the time Tippett was becoming known had left behind a reputation which was not always respected, “lacked intellectual fibre.”⁸⁷ Kemp then also mentions Tippett’s work at Morley College and the fact that he often performed works of Purcell by writing that he carried on a “Purcell tradition” begun by Holst.⁸⁸ In this manner, Kemp has disconnected Tippett from the tradition that he is actually inheriting, that of Vaughan Williams and his generation, and places him back at the starting point, with Purcell. He is then able to assert that Tippett has “led English music away from provincialism into a more continentally orientated style based on a wide knowledge of musical tradition” in a similar fashion to Britten.⁸⁹ Perhaps he was aware of the limited prospects for narrow, national music and was attempting to link the new generation to a wider international platform. No matter what the reasoning, it is clear that Tippett, at least in this instance, is portrayed as a promoter of a new English tradition, despite the fact that this work has no connections to said tradition, either as inherited from Vaughan Williams, or from Purcell.

⁸⁷ Kemp, *Tippett The Composer and his Music*, 15.

⁸⁸ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 44.

⁸⁹ Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, 87.

6. BRITTEN

Benjamin Britten is perhaps most well known as a composer of operas such as *Peter Grimes*, which catapulted him to the status of a household name, and didactic children's pieces, like his popular *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. But there is an altogether different side portrayed in his chamber music. Britten began his compositional career dabbling in chamber music, with pieces like his *Phantasy Quartet* (1932) and *Rhapsody String Quartet* (1929), but while establishing his career he focused on composing operatic and choral pieces, and generally ignored the chamber music genre.⁹⁰ His second numbered String Quartet, in C Major, completed in November of 1945 for the 250th anniversary celebration of Purcell's death, came four years after the first, and nearly thirty years before the third. This Second Quartet, considered by some critics to be an improvement on his First Quartet, if still somewhat lengthy and cerebral, is often cited as an embodiment of Britten's 'Englishness,' with great emphasis placed on the third movement, titled "Chacony," as well as the historical context of the work, namely, that it was composed in the months directly following the end of the Second World War. Although Britten was certainly English, every piece of his music is not necessarily so. While there is no denying that Britten was on some level patriotic – nationalism was an inherent part of his personality – other than the timeframe of composition and the context of the premiere, there is no reason to believe that his Second Quartet is in essence, a work of distinctive 'Englishness.' More than anything, the Second Quartet represents the universal appeal of Britten's music, as opposed to an ethnic or cultural specificity.

⁹⁰ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 551.

6.1. THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC

For Britten, the predominant emotion of the early part of the war was not fear, but guilt. Until 1942 he was travelling throughout North America, which was, until recently, neutral, with his partner Peter Pears. They had left England, in part, because of the tumultuous political state, although Britten also had commissions and concert series in the States which he felt would benefit his international reputation. Britten's feelings toward England, and the state of affairs concerning the war, during this time are understandably conflicted – while he had certain reservations about his homeland, his loved ones still remained in the path of a world war, and he regretted being so far away from them. He toyed with the idea of staying permanently in the States (“I think it may be this side of the Atlantic for me”), but eventually returned to be near friends and family.⁹¹ Still, it is important to note that even when war in America became a reality, Britten did not return immediately to England. It can be inferred from this hesitation that Britten may not have been looking forward to a return. Perhaps, too, the feelings were mutual, for he wrote in 1939 that “England, at the moment, is not too keen for us to go back.”⁹² While he was very much attached to his homeland, as evidenced by his love for educational children's pieces, which served the purpose of giving back to the community in which he was raised, Britten was also an outsider. To be a homosexual in early twentieth century Europe was to be considered fundamentally different. James Day notes that “above all psychologically, he found himself quite by chance in a ‘rebel’ position: he was a homosexual in a society where his sexual tendencies were regarded as

⁹¹ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 672.

⁹² Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 608.

at best an unfortunate aberration and at worst a crime and a sin.”⁹³ One could hypothesize feelings of resentment and rejection on Britten’s part; he dedicated so much of his life to bettering a society which ultimately could not accept him as he was. As evidence to Britten’s conflicted nationalism, one must only look as far as his most famous opera, *Peter Grimes*. This theme of an individual at odds with society is present even in his most ‘English’ opera.

Despite these inconsistent and seemingly incompatible emotions, Britten remained loyal at heart to his country, and hoped always for its success, although he disagreed with the militaristic means. After all, when he returned from America he, like Tippett, registered as a conscientious objector. Friend Laurence Gilliam said of Britten’s pacifism: “I have spoken to him and I gather his line is anti-killing but anti-fascist in all other respects.”⁹⁴ Britten, for one, expressed relief at being able to avoid the perils of war for the most part, both in America and at home, because he was allowed to forgo enlistment and avoid combat. In a letter from 1942 he confesses:

“I was terribly relieved by it of course, & immediately started feeling guilty about the whole situation – why was I able to go on working while so many other...etc. etc. However, that was just reaction I suppose, & I’ve made up for it by doing this load of work which otherwise I wouldn’t touch...”⁹⁵

He felt then, as he did throughout the remainder of the war, that his greatest service to his country would be to survive the conflict and continue composing. In 1939 he laments his absence during a time of need, but admits his uselessness as a soldier: “I must say that

⁹³ Day, ‘Englishness’ in *Music*, 213.

⁹⁴ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1048.

⁹⁵ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1088.

I wish I were with all my friends in England, but I feel at the moment that I am of more use doing the one thing I can do over here.”⁹⁶

6.2. NATIONALISM

Britten, who has never been represented as so simplistically nationalistic as Vaughan Williams, nor as radical as Tippett, stands somewhat between the two extremes. Though he did not make all of the sacrifices that Vaughan Williams did during the war, he was very involved in the war effort, and post-war recovery, though his contributions were largely musical. One such example is a concert series he took part in during the months following the end of the war. These concerts, which focused mainly on central Europe, were to benefit victims of Nazi Concentration Camps. It is clear through his reactions to this concert tour that he made a clear separation between nationality and political agenda – he shows no evidence of bitterness or resentment towards the German population, despite the horrors of the war. In fact, while travelling through Germany after the war, he said of the German people “but we saw heavenly little German villages, with sweetest people in them (I swear that the Teutons are the most beautiful (& cleanest) race on earth).”⁹⁷ Not exactly the anti-German response that a starkly nationalistic Englishman would have given, but this is due, perhaps, in part to the fact that Britten only returned home after the terrible air-raids of 1940. Having been several thousand miles away, he did not experience first-hand much of the suffering that England endured early in the war. By the time that he left America, the war was already transforming to favor the Allies.

⁹⁶ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 701.

⁹⁷ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1272.

This response, however, is not at all unexpected when taken within the context of Britten's general views on nationalism. Although he identified himself as English, and wrote in the early 1930s "I'm gradually realising that I'm English - & as a composer I suppose I feel I want more definite roots than other people" his views were not so simple on the eve of war.⁹⁸ In correspondence from 1939 Britten relayed his sentiments, saying that "these days Nationality is only a convenience (or inconvenience!) and has nothing to do with what one feels about countries."⁹⁹ Later, his 1941 article on English Folk Music elaborates upon this idea. Britten writes:

Those circumstances which prompted the whole movement of Nationalism in England have been not above suspicion. Any cultural 'movement' (especially if it ends in 'ism') is more often than not a cover for inefficiency or lack of artistic direction. If one is unsatisfied with a piece of work it is useful to have some theory to shield it, and Nationalism is as good as any other – especially when one is dealing with foreigners!¹⁰⁰

This assertion really hits at the heart of the problem with 'Englishness', or at least the problematic way which it has commonly been used – that it is a bulletproof vest for critics and composers to hide behind. The problem with this is twofold. First, less talented composers, and their critics, use it as a way to elevate bad music to a transcendent, untouchable level (as Britten notes). But even more disturbing is the association that nationalistic music receives – that because it is labeled 'English' it must not be any good. If it were, it would not need to wear the protective veil of 'Englishness'. This is especially problematic for good music which happens to be, precipitately or rightly, labeled 'English'. Well-read listeners might wrongly suppose that there is some deficiency in the music when there is not.

⁹⁸ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 253.

⁹⁹ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 707.

¹⁰⁰ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 925.

In addition to acknowledging the dubious nature of a nationalistic piece of music, Britten questioned the ability of music to represent such an abstract idea at all. In an interview with the *New York Sun* on April 27, 1939 he made his position known, saying:

I don't believe you can express social or political or economic theories in music, but by coupling new music with well known musical phrases, I think it's possible to get over certain ideas.¹⁰¹

This quote gives the impression that Britten doubted literal readings of music to satisfy political or social ends, but the qualifying statement at the end also allows room for interpretation on the listener's part. Such an allowance was mostly likely motivated by Britten's own pacifistic inclinations and the fact that he was "most anxious for his music to be used in this type of work" as Laurence Gilliam recalls.¹⁰² Still, there is no evidence, historically, biographically, or musically that the Second Quartet stands as a piece of extraordinary pacifism. Indeed, if it did, it would most likely sacrifice some of its 'Englishness', for nationalism and pacifism were incompatible philosophies during the Second World War.

6.3. FOR MRS. J.L. BEHREND

Britten's experience with chamber music began, no doubt, quite early in his life as a result of his viola and piano playing. Certainly at least by the end of his time at the Royal College of Music in 1933 he had been introduced to basic chamber music repertoire. It is then easy to see what sort of a role chamber music, particularly the string quartet, played in Britten's life, for his works in this genre act as virtual bookends of his compositional activity. The multitude of unpublished quartet fragments and exercises

¹⁰¹ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 705.

¹⁰² Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1048.

that are preserved in the Britten-Pears Foundation testify to Britten's enduring fascination with and attachment to this genre. Though the first numbered quartet was composed in 1941, Britten's first attempt in this genre was in 1931, and his third and final Quartet is dated 1976, mere months before his death.¹⁰³ The Second Quartet, however, occupies a much more curious position in his creative career, sitting directly behind his most famous work, *Peter Grimes*, and in the middle of a period dominated by operatic and vocal works. As a result, it has a tendency to be overlooked and oversimplified.

It is, for example, scarcely referenced without mentioning the circumstance of and basis for its creation: that it was commissioned for a concert in honor of the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. The association with Purcell and the English tradition is supported most often through the title and the form of the final movement, "Chacony." The actual act of and motivation behind the quartet's creation, however, is much more complex, in part because of the lack of correspondence between Britten and Mary Behrend, who commissioned the quartet in the early part of 1945. In fact, during the months that he must have been writing, Britten himself makes no mention of the composition of the Second Quartet, perhaps due to his busy schedule and an illness he contracted during his travels on the Continent. But it can be inferred that he finished the piece fairly quickly, as he replied to the commission in February, and the premiere was the latter part of November the same year. In fact, in the program notes for the quartet's premiere concert, Britten writes that "this work was written in September and October of this year" (A reproduction of the original concert program can be found below in Figure 16a).

¹⁰³ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 557.

All in all, the quartet's process of creation is not well documented, perhaps the experience was too private for him to include in correspondence or diary entries. His one reflective statement, in a letter to Behrend, calls the Quartet "the greatest advance that I have yet made," although he does not clarify exactly what he means by this.¹⁰⁴ It is possible that Britten declined to discuss the making of this quartet, because, as John Herschel Baron asserts, it was "written in shocked reaction to the sights of war-torn continental Europe which Britten witnessed firsthand in 1945."¹⁰⁵ After all, he had spent time on the Continent during the months in which he was supposedly composing his Second Quartet. If this is the case, then the piece could be considered proof of Britten's cosmopolitan humanism – a sort of extension of the charity that he was performing already in Europe through the concert series. Still, this interpretation runs the risk of overcontextualizing the work, the same way that the argument for 'Englishness' does, but to the opposite effect. The fact of the matter is, this quartet is far too abstract for a literal reading either of stark patriotism, or international sympathy, and both interpretations simplify not only the music itself, but the man who wrote it.

6.4. QUARTET NO. 2 IN C

Barring such speculations or circumstantial evidence of creation and the sentiments of either the composer himself or his fellow countrymen, there still remains no undeniable presence of 'Englishness' in the Second Quartet. It is arranged in three movements: the first plays on a nebulous three-part theme, unfolding in modified Sonata Form; the second is a lively vivace above arpeggiated harmonies; the third is the much

¹⁰⁴ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1285.

¹⁰⁵ Baron, *Intimate Music*, 406.

referenced “Chacony”, a theme and variations divided by cadenzas into four sections, which deal with the harmony, rhythm, melody, and form, respectively. Most often, critics have found evidence of Britten’s ‘Englishness’ in one of the following places in this work: modality, rhythm, form, and in the third and final movement as a whole. Yet, what is being suggested to demonstrate hints of ‘Englishness’ is often not only weakly represented or totally absent, but completely misconstrued. As an example, there is the aspect of modality, which is frequently considered an ‘English’ characteristic. The first hint of modality occurs within the initial exposition of the quartet’s theme (which for the present purposes is referenced as three themes, as in Keller’s 1947 analysis) of the first movement. The first theme is solidly in C, though major and minor are obscured, while the second is based on the dominant, G, and the third stretches up to D. Beginning on the fourth beat of measure 19, the first violin, viola and cello (in unison while the

Figure 10: Britten. Quartet No. 2 in C, 1st mvt, m. 17-32. Viola and Cello as Violin I.



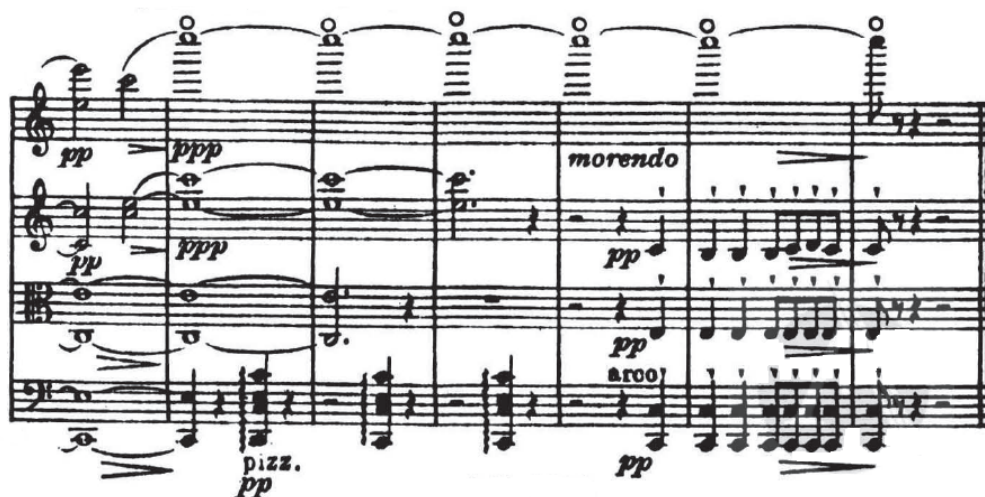
second violin sustains the G-B tenth of the second theme) meander up what appears to be a brief A Mixolydian fragment, which adjusts into A major just before the third theme. The third theme then seems to start in D major as the cello sustains D and F sharp at a tenth, but expands into D Lydian as the G sharp from the A major passage a few measures prior does not disappear, but rather situates itself as the cornerstone of the theme (Figure 10). The whole feeling of modality is, however, hardly resolute, and one could easily understand the previous examples without modal bearing. The A Mixolydian melodic passage can easily be initially interpreted as D major – part of introducing the third theme, while the third theme itself, with a D tonic, could be

Figure 11: Britten. Quartet No. 2 in C, 1st mvt, m. 111-116.



understood to shift almost immediately to A major, as the G sharp is far more stressed than either the tonic or its leading tone. Throughout the development, the third theme (the most thoroughly treated of the themes) is thrown about harmonically and does not retain the modal sense that it had in the exposition. For example, this theme returns at the very start of the development, but now in C (minor for the most part) and on the fifth, G, rather than the augmented fourth (Figure 11). The third theme then has a fully C (minor) quality rather than Lydian. The theme is handled similarly throughout the remainder of the movement, occurring either on the tonic of the implied key, or on the fifth. It is likely, then, that Britten used modality in the Second Quartet not as an end in and of itself, or as an overt or inadvertent gesture of 'Englishness', but from a purely compositional point, as a tool of harmonic transition. The entire exposition of the three themes of the first movement is one of ascent, harmonically and melodically, and the

Figure 12: Britten. Quartet No. 2 in C, 1st mvt, m. 302-8.



modes that Britten used emphasized or created the sense of expansion which continues throughout the entire movement. Even in the coda the extension continues through slow

unfolding of the C-E tenth to the high harmonic E of the first violin where in the final measures the third themes echoes – a last reminder of the initial augmentation of the exposition (Figure 12).

The argument of ‘English’ modality deserves consideration, because in defining ‘Englishness’ in music, Jill Halstead concretely asserts that it is “a musical syntax of modal melody” which indicates the presence of ‘Englishness’.¹⁰⁶ Even if this statement is correct, and there is no doubt many English folk-song are indeed modal, Britten’s Second Quartet still would not reflect ‘Englishness’. First, there is the issue that only the third theme has significant “modal” elements, and cannot be considered a modal melody. Second, and more importantly, the propagation of modality as a primarily ‘English’ trait is difficult and unconvincing considering that several other nationalities and non-English composers have used modal melodies in their compositions throughout history, and particularly in the early twentieth century. Of course, qualifiers can be made concerning the specific use of modes and connection to modality, but to make a blanket statement that modal melodies equal ‘Englishness’ is false. Hans Keller, who had a close intellectual friendship with Britten and is the dedicatee of his Third Quartet, argues that Britten’s use of modes not only “serves as a strong bridge between the diatonicism of the past and the anti-diatonicism of the present and of the present future” but also “amalgamate[s] his Englishry with our age’s originally continental tendency towards (re-) discovery.”¹⁰⁷ In these two assertions, Keller neatly fuses Britten into the position of not only a link from the past to the future, but from continental to collective. In this sense, Britten’s use of modality is not an exclusive gesture of ‘Englishness’, but an inclusive one of universality.

¹⁰⁶ Jill Halstead, *Ruth Gipps: Anti-Modernism, Nationalism and Difference in English Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 102.

¹⁰⁷ Keller, “The Musical Character,” 342-3.

The Second Quartet certainly exhibits several uses of modality, though as Keller notes, Britten “*naturalizes* modality” in such a way that, without close inspection, such passages occur almost imperceptibly.¹⁰⁸ And in general, the primary characteristic of such passages is not a strong emphasis on modality, but rather the use of modes to enhance the harmonic vocabulary of the work.

The rhythms in Britten’s Second Quartet also give no sense of English simplicity, or “rhythmic straightforwardness”, as Halstead maintains.¹⁰⁹ While not inherently complicated, they present a sense of rhythm, and meter, which is often difficult to pin down. This occurs not only in the first movement, where Britten obscures the dominant pulse of the primarily simple rhythms, but also in the second movement ‘Vivace’, which is in six-eight. Eighth-note arpeggios dominate two of the four voices for the majority of the movement, while the remaining two scamper up and down in stepwise motion and intervals of a fourth, playing on a permutation of the third theme from the initial movement. It is not the actual rhythm here that is disorienting, but the way in which it is fashioned. The stepwise motion and repeated notes lend such passages a feeling of two against three. Indeed, the first violin later transitions into three-four, then two-four, and back again, all while the lower three instruments remain in six-eight. For a brief while, all instruments are lured into two-four, and then fall back into six-eight again as the first violin continues on its way (Figure 13). All of this hardly epitomizes the “rhythmic straightforwardness” for which ‘English’ music is supposedly known.

¹⁰⁸ Keller, “The Musical Character,” 342.

¹⁰⁹ Halstead, *Ruth Gipps*, 102.

Figure 13: Britten. Quartet No. 2 in C, 2nd mvt, m. 148-156.



Then there is the matter of form, which in an ‘English’ piece one would expect to be either classically formed, or arranged in a rurally programmatic manner.¹¹⁰ Britten’s Second Quartet is neither of these. Rather, he uses two well known forms – the sonata and the chaconne – and reworks them, suppressing traditional purpose, or according to Keller, solving the modern problem.¹¹¹ The first movement is in sonata form, but even from the very beginning deviates from tradition with an exposition within an exposition, introducing the three themes, which according to Walter Cobbett “form a continuous and coherent melody which may equally well be regarded as the single main theme of the

¹¹⁰ Halstead, *Ruth Gipps*, 102.

¹¹¹ Hans Keller, “Benjamin Britten’s Second Quartet,” *Tempo* 3 (March 1947): 8.

movement.”¹¹² The development, while of normal proportion, deals almost exclusively with the third theme, and the first theme, which is generally the most developed, is completely ignored. It only returns in the recapitulation at measure 243, though in the second violin part and simultaneously with the other two themes – the second augmented in the first violin, and the third in the viola – above C major arpeggios in the cello (Figure 14). This sort of squelched return of the original themes, which does not

Figure 14: Britten. Quartet No. 2, 1st mvt, m. 242-246.



follow traditional sonata form stipulation that the themes be transposed to the tonic key, also effectively attenuates the psychological return of sonata form. What follows is a coda of “twenty-three bars of the purest C major” in an effort to balance the harmonic tension of the movement.¹¹³ Halstead asserts that “musical nationalism in England grew from the need to re-establish the familiar at a time of great social and political change” and was a “withdrawal to a romanticized and ordered past, rather than an advance into

¹¹² Cobbett, *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 94.

¹¹³ David Matthews, “The String Quartets and Some other Chamber Works,” In *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), 388.

an uncertain future.”¹¹⁴ What Britten has done with sonata form could then be interpreted as a sort of formal (as in relating to the form) rebellion against the re-establishment of ‘Englishness’ – with this constricted recapitulation symbolizing the impossibility of a return to the past as it was. Of course, he was not one to make political statements in music; if he would not have taken a stance for ‘Englishness’, then he also would have not taken a strong one against it. But this alteration of form definitely suggests that he was not purposefully writing in an ‘English’ style, even if he did not go so far as to denounce it. That is, of course, assuming that adhering to form makes one, or one’s compositions ‘English’.

In regards to the “Chacony,” which several critics equate with ‘Englishness,’ and a direct reference to Purcell, there is no great wealth of evidence. Certainly, the piece is a chaconne – Britten himself described the “harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, and formal aspects” from which the nine-bar theme is reviewed in the program notes for the premiere performance. But the outcome of this chaconne is so different from what Purcell would have composed that the linkage is only recognized through the clear title. One wonders if the audience would have made such a literal connection without the help of this designation. It must have been useful for the general cohesiveness of the concert to label the Quartet, the only new composition, in such a way. Even if the public did not know that Purcell was fond of chaconnes, they would have understood the very English spelling. In any case, the music of the “Chacony,” by virtue of its variations on harmony, rhythm, melody and form does not adhere to ‘English’ traits.¹¹⁵ There is no overwhelming modality, no rhythmic simplicity, and no direct quotation of Purcell’s melodies. The

¹¹⁴ Halstead, *Ruth Gipps*, 101.

¹¹⁵ Keller, “Benjamin Britten’s Second Quartet,” 8.

single exception, which may have evoked images of ‘Englishness’ to certain listeners, is the presence of a few, isolated cross-relations. Probably the most noticeable example is near the very end of the movement, in measure 195. Here the first violin, viola and cello move from an E Flat to E Natural, while the second violin sustains E Flat (Figure 15). Although this may have been an allusion to the English musical tradition of Purcell’s

Figure 15: Britten. Quartet No. 2, 1st mvt, m. 194-196.



time – and perhaps the only conscious attempt on Britten’s part – it is not nearly enough to warrant the label of ‘Englishness for the entire piece.

6.5. THE REASON FOR LABELING AT ALL

It is also arguable that Behrend’s commission may have influenced ‘English’ labeling which has persisted alongside of this work, although it is difficult to say to what extent. The correspondence regarding the initial request of the commission is

unfortunately no longer to be found.¹¹⁶ Still, one could presume that in commissioning a work to honor Purcell, the most noted and most ‘English’ (perhaps only as a result of being the most noted) composer in collective English memory, Behrend intended the work to be the model of new ‘Englishness’. Certainly in requesting a String Quartet she taps into the long chamber music tradition in England. As Ernst Meyer notes, “among all the musical centres of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, Britain was first and foremost in the realm of chamber music. In this field the supremacy of this country was undisputed.”¹¹⁷ Britten himself says very little of the requirements in his reply and acceptance, dated February 10, 1945. He does, however, mention a preconceived quartet, saying that “I have had a quartet at the back of my mind for sometime, & your sweet offer will do alot towards bringing it to life.”¹¹⁸ In this regard, even if Behrend’s commission stipulated a strictly and obviously ‘English’ work, Britten’s pre-existing ideas (which probably did not have ‘English’ intentions) must be taken into account. It is then plausible to consider that the all-important “Chacony” title may well have been an afterthought, rather than a central component. As evidence in favor of this speculation, the Purcell dedication which is quite prominent on the program of the premiere is notably absent on the 1946 score published by Boosey and Hawkes (Figure 16a and 16b). In fact, the only dedication on the 1946 score is to Mary Behrend, and the introductory page, which gives the date of commission, and premiering quartet, does not mention the context of the quartet’s premiere, or basis for its creation (Figure 16b). This alteration seems to suggest that Britten, after the premier concert, no longer felt to need to

¹¹⁶ In an email to me, dated October 31, 2008, archivist Nick Clark of the Britten-Pears Foundation wrote that “I have had a look through Mary Behrend’s correspondence to Britten...I’m afraid that I cannot find any reference to her commission for the 2nd String Quartet.”

¹¹⁷ Ernst H. Meyer, *English Chamber Music: The History of a Great Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 2.

¹¹⁸ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1241.

Figure 16a: Excerpt from premiere program, dated Wednesday 21st November 1945.

STRING QUARTET NO. 2 IN C, OP. 36
(Written in homage to Henry Purcell)
First Performance
 ZORIAN STRING QUARTET
 (ZORIAN . LAVERS . COPPERWHEAT . SEMINO)

This work was written in September and October of this year. It is in three movements. I. (Allegro moderato ma comodo) which is in fully worked out sonata form based on three subjects announced at the beginning—each starting with the rise of a tenth. II (Vivace) a scherzo and trio, muted throughout, with a prominent *saltando* arpeggio figure. III (Chacony—Adagio). There are twenty-two statements of the nine bar theme. The movement is in four sections divided by cadenzas for 'cello, viola (with 2nd violin accompanying) and 1st violin. The sections may be said to review the theme from (a) harmonic, (b) rhythmic, (c) melodic and (d) formal aspects. B.B.

Figure 16b: Excerpts from the first published score, dated 1946.

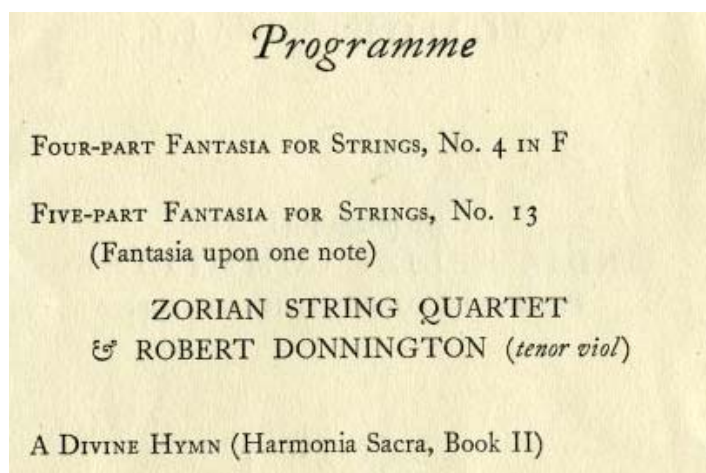
This work was composed in 1945. It was first performed on
 21 November that year by the Zorian String Quartet.
For Mrs. J. L. Behrend

QUARTET NO 2 in C
 I
 Allegro calmo senza rigore (♩ = 120) Benjamin Britten Op. 36

Violin I
 Violin II
 Viola
 Cello

maintain the work's connection to Purcell. Perhaps he realized the limitations of such an obviously 'English' reference, and preferred instead to allow the piece to speak for itself on an international stage. Additionally, it is relevant that at its premiere, amidst genuine Purcell works, and realizations by Britten, the Second Quartet, as the sole original composition, may have been heard in a different light. Other compositions performed on November 21, 1945, were Purcell's Four-part Fantasia for Strings, No. 4 in F, and Five-part Fantasia, No. 13 (*Fantasia Upon One Note*), Britten's realization of Purcell's 'The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation', among other vocal works, and Purcell's Trio Sonata in F ("Golden" Sonata) (Figure 17). In these circumstances, with the sounds of the very 'English' Purcell fresh in their ears, it is conceivable that the audience drew connections

Figure 17: Excerpt from premier program, dated Wednesday 21st November 1945.



where there were none and overemphasized the "Purcellian" elements of Britten's homage. It is also likely that, after this initial association was made, very few critics found reason to disprove, or even question the presence of 'Englishness' in this particular composition, especially if said critics were English themselves, and realized the benefit of

having Britten's talent in their corner. Still, tradition and habit are no reason to accept the presence of what is absent.

There exists also the distinct possibility that Britten was highly aware of national strands in music, and was able to use these sounds, even 'Englishness' at his own discretion. Several works suggest this technique. *Canadian Carnival*, composed in 1939 during Britten's trip to North America, has a recognizably "North American" feel, reminiscent at times of Copland's *Rodeo*. As a further example, the *Mont Juic* Suite, a collaboration with Lennox Berkeley, was written in 1937 as a reaction to the Spanish Revolution, which began in 1936. This Catalan Dance Suite has an apparent "Spanish" flair, which Britten and Lennox were able to reproduce quite convincingly, despite very non-Spanish heritages. As an example of legitimate 'Englishness', there is the *Suite on English Folk Tunes*, composed in 1974, which exhibits far more 'Englishness' than merely an English title (the Second Quartet proves how unconvincing these can be). Of course, in using folk melodies (which are absent in the Second Quartet), Britten sets up a near necessity of encompassed 'Englishness'. These examples prove nonetheless that Britten had the ability and awareness to create nationally infused music, even and especially if that nationality was his own. In fact, in exhibiting a consideration of nationality in music, it is far more likely that Britten's 'Englishness' was not, as Colls and Dodd have suggested, a matter of little thought. Rather, nationality seems to have been, for Britten, a subject of considerable reflection, which occasionally, but not necessarily, spilled over into his music. As Keller proposed earlier, in his comparison of Britten and Mozart, it is precisely this sensitivity and ability to imitate which allowed both composers a cosmopolitanism which transcended the boundaries of one nationality. This same

cosmopolitan feature has afforded Britten widespread accessibility and allowed him to permeate limits previously set on 'English' composers. The fact that Britten's fame extends beyond the borders of the small island that he called home is testament to this reality. It is little wonder that English critics were, and continue to be, so eager to label Britten's music as 'English'. Once he was able to escape the confines of narrowly 'English' composers and achieve international notoriety, his style, in an effort to propagate nationality, was considered 'English'.

7. THE ENGLISH MUSICAL RENAISSANCE

Despite evident individual ideological, generational, and stylistic differences between these three men, there is something to be said for the fact that they each chose to write a string quartet near or soon after the end of the war. The quartet has long been seen as the pinnacle of compositional activity – something able to express the inexpressible, a private platform for the deepest emotion. As historian Paul Griffiths asserts, the string quartet is “the most intimate of musical genres.”¹¹⁹ Herbert Antcliffe, too, writes that string quartets are “at once the basis and the pinnacle of the most difficult and the most intimate of all forms of instrumental music.”¹²⁰ John Herschel Baron adds that “most devotees of chamber music find that the crucial element in chamber music is the intimacy of this kind of art.”¹²¹ Yet, while all three composers chose the string quartet during the final years of the war, each had a different background and experience with the form.

For Vaughan Williams, it was a genre that did not dominate his oeuvre, and indeed he needed a great deal of persuasion and nearly two years to produce his Second Quartet – his final attempt at the form. Britten, on the other hand, first came to know the quartet as a student and a performer. As a result, he was far more familiar with the form, and began experimenting early on in his career. Still, it was nearly twenty years until he returned to the genre for his Second Quartet, and another thirty until his Third. Though Tippett, similarly to Britten, did not write quartets for several decades between his Third and Fourth, he stands somewhat in opposition to both Vaughan Williams and Britten. Tippett wrote a total of five numbered quartets, two during the war. His Third Quartet,

¹¹⁹ Paul Griffiths, *The String Quartet* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 8.

¹²⁰ Antcliffe, “The Recent Rise of Chamber Music in England,” 13.

¹²¹ Baron, *Intimate Music*, 11.

which he began in 1945, was, like Britten's Second, the result of a commission by Mrs. Mary Behrend.

Without too much over-contextualization or dramatization, it is possible to conclude that the emotional stress of life at war had a certain amount of influence on each of these composers' decisions to write a string quartet. British historian Jose Harris speculates that the reasons for such increased artistic activity were in direct response to the war. She notes that "visions of the post-war world consisted overwhelmingly not of social reconstruction but of 'retreat into private worlds of the imagination'."¹²² No other musical genre or form has been considered to reside more within the "private world" than the String Quartet, so it is only fitting that it would be used as a musical escape. It is possible, too, that there were other more concrete outside forces acting upon each of these composers during the end of the war – some shared or common reason that so many English composers looked to the quartet during these years.

In a general sense, the 1940s were a culmination of what came to be known as the English musical Renaissance, and chamber music, including the string quartet, was at the very center of this revival. This renewal, which Herbert Antcliffe notes in his 1920 article "The Recent Rise of Chamber Music in England," began around the turn of the century. Antcliffe asserts that "one of the most striking features of the rapid development of music in England during the last twenty years has been the rise of a really great school of Chamber Music composers."¹²³ This he traces back several centuries (much in the same way that his peers would trace 'Englishness' to Purcell) to a time "when a 'chest of viols' was part of the furniture of every well-appointed house, [and] England led the

¹²² Harris, "Great Britain: The People's War?," 25.

¹²³ Antcliffe, "The Recent Rise of Chamber Music in England," 12.

world in chamber music as in all other kinds of music.”¹²⁴ The reason that England’s musical Renaissance was led by new compositions in chamber music is twofold – a combination of implicit and deliberate forces. Implicitly, there was a strong sense in the literature of the time that the English temperament was best expressed in chamber form. Walter Willson Cobbett, who played an important role in this revival, notes in his *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* that “it is natural that English musical talent should manifest itself in intimate art of this kind” because the English are “a reticent and undemonstrative race.”¹²⁵ Antcliffe agrees, noting that “it is the necessity for restraint and self-control so characteristic of chamber music that makes some critics of music and musical life regard chamber music as something peculiarly suited to the genius of the British people.”¹²⁶

The result of this school of thought was a group of performers, sponsors, writers, critics, and composers who deliberately propagated this idea through competitions, commissions, and prose. In addition to performing groups like the Oxford University Musical Club, the Oxford University Musical Union, the Cambridge University Musical Club, and the London Strings Club, founded by Gwynne Kimpton, violinist Walter Willson Cobbett was a great force in motivating new chamber music works. Cobbett held in 1905 the first competition for new chamber music compositions by English composers. The resulting works, which Antcliffe admits were “perhaps not of the highest rank, but all of musicianly character” were supplemented by Cobbett’s commissions and support for “Phantasy” works. Another central figure, particularly for the three quartets studied here, is Mrs. Mary Behrend, who commissioned both Britten’s Second and

¹²⁴ Antcliffe, “The Recent Rise of Chamber Music in England,” 12.

¹²⁵ Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 195.

¹²⁶ Antcliffe, “The Recent Rises of Chamber Music in England,” 13.

Tippett's Third Quartet. Unfortunately, Mrs. Behrend, who obviously played an integral role in support of the arts and particularly of string quartets, has been all but overlooked in contemporary and recent literature. It is for this reason that no definite assessments can be made regarding her intentions or background, but her importance should, nevertheless, be stressed.

8. THE ROLE OF THE STRING QUARTET IN THE LAND WITHOUT MUSIC

A quick look into the history of the string quartet and its status in the twentieth century may explain why it was in need of resuscitation in England. The string quartet has historically been considered an Austro-Germanic form, led by composers such as Haydn and Beethoven. English music had, on the other hand, focused mainly on oratorio, opera, and song forms since the eighteenth century. This is due in part to Handel's monumental influence on an 'English' style. As Lang notes, after Handel "every British composer found it obligatory to write pious oratorios and anthems in what they conceived to be a Handelian style."¹²⁷ Baron judges that the hiatus in English chamber music writing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is due to a general supremacy of foreign style, not Handel alone. He writes:

The particular national styles of these three foreign lands [Italy, France, Germany], then, had a great impact on the chamber music of London during the late 17th and early 18th centuries and completely replaced what during the first two thirds of the 17th century had been one of the most viable chamber music traditions of Europe.¹²⁸

It is likely that this quote hits at the center of the need for 'Englishness' in these three quartets: they would represent an eventual victory over the foreign chamber music invasion. Indeed, Griffiths mentions that this cultural struggle played out on the field of quartet writing, noting that:

Britten's striving to accommodate himself to the string quartet – to find some discourse between England and the Austro-German-Hungarian heartland of the genre – had been paralleled in the work of other English composers, who similarly had reached back into their own history for a ground bass.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Lang, *Handel*, 699.

¹²⁸ Baron, *Intimate Music*, 111.

¹²⁹ Griffiths, *The String Quartet*, 203.

This perception, regardless of its accuracy, is an interesting explanation for the repetitive insistence upon a Purcellian connection. If English composers and critics inherited a huge, metaphorical chip on their shoulder from the seventeenth century, then it seems logical that a famous and accomplished seventeenth-century composer, or a professed similarity to him, would remedy this alleged inadequacy. This perceived deficiency had been somewhat resolved by the time that Vaughan Williams, Britten, and Tippett were composing their quartets during the war, but they faced a greater, non-musical obstacle: the reality of war.

The war, at its very start, brought external musical life in England to an abrupt halt. As E.D. Mackerness notes, “when the war broke out in September 1939 there was an immediate cancellation of public musical activities.”¹³⁰ This included the revocation of planned concerts, orchestra rehearsals, and radio performances. The result of such an unforeseen halt was tremendous, and in the years to come regular musical life would be replaced with “wartime” concerts. Such concerts were often held at alternative locations, apt to sudden cancellation at the threat of air-raids, and meant that performers, conductors, and composers must accept a “wartime” salary. By 1942, however, when Vaughan Williams began composition on his Second Quartet, the London music scene, at least, was regaining a sense of normalcy after several years of semi-regular rehearsals and said wartime concerts. Ursula Vaughan Williams recalls that nearly three years after the outbreak of war, “music-making in London was reviving and, after a winter of raids, the long light evenings were full of hope and promise.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ E.D. Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 265.

¹³¹ Vaughan Williams, R.V.W., 246.

It is not too outrageous to think that, in addition to a psychological motivation for quartet composition during and directly after the war, there was an added practical benefit: namely, a quartet performance required fewer performers. Smaller ensembles were not only easier to organize, but they were cheaper and easier to produce on a “wartime” budget. Additionally, there was an international tradition of high-quality chamber music performance in London in general, and at Wigmore Hall in particular. The Hall, which describes itself as “the national concert hall for chamber music and song”¹³² was “a center for the performance of chamber music throughout the 20th century. All important ensembles who seek world recognition perform regularly there,” according to Baron.¹³³

An overview of the number and scope of string quartets written by English composers during and just after the war reinforces this assumption. William Walton’s string quartet in A Minor, for example, dates from 1945-6 and Elizabeth Lutyens wrote her Third String Quartet in 1949. Even more curious is the number of first attempts in the genre which occurred during this time: Britten and Arthur Bliss both wrote their first numbered quartets in 1941. Tippett revised his First Quartet (written 1936-8) in 1944 and wrote his Second in 1941-2, and his first three were all premiered in Wigmore Hall. Benjamin Frankel wrote two quartets during the war (1944-45) and his Third shortly after (1947). This is only a sampling, of course, and does not include other chamber compositions of the time, but it does give a taste of the compositional atmosphere of the time.

¹³² Wigmore Hall, www.wigmore-hall.org.uk.

¹³³ Baron, *Intimate Music*, 407.

String quartet works did, however, play an important role in the perceived Renaissance of English music in the twentieth century, in combination with the contextual, personal, and national motivations which have been presented. It is important to know that this resurgence of English musical culture was not a mere retrospective labeling, but rather a tangible and decisive movement. In a 1943 letter to Imogen Holst, Britten related:

It is also encouraging that you too sense that 'something' in the air which heralds a renaissance. I feel terrifically conscious of it, so do Peter, & Clifford, & Michael Tippett & so many that I love & admire – it is good to add you to that list! Whether we are the voices crying in the wilderness or the thing itself, it isn't for us to know, but anyhow it is so very exciting. It is of course in all the arts, but in music, particularly, it's this acceptance of 'freedom' without any arbitrary restrictions, this simplicity, this contact with the audiences of our own time, & of people like ourselves, this seriousness & above all this professionalism.¹³⁴

This self-awareness presents an interesting dilemma concerning the genuineness of such a revolution. Historians are so accustomed to dissecting and labeling history that when a portion of it decides to label itself, questions arise. Debates of the reality of this Renaissance, however, are not important when discussing 'Englishness', because the term itself is also self-applied, or applied by those of the same age and culture. It is interesting to consider the rampant self-labeling of this particular nation and era, but within the context of identity, rather than ultimate truth.

¹³⁴ Britten, *Letters from a Life*, 1162.

9. COSMOPOLITANISM VS. NATIONALISM

One of the most romanticized and idealized aspects of music as presented in Western writing is its universality. The idea that music is a universal language which transcends political, cultural, and geographical borders is, however, at odds with nationalism in music. Indeed, most twentieth century writers and critics seems to discard this idea fairly quickly in their arguments by citing examples of starkly local composers, like Bach, and their resulting international fame. Vaughan Williams, in his writings on national music, says of this claim of universality:

It is not even true that music has a universal vocabulary, but even if it were so it is the use of the vocabulary that counts and no one supposes that French and English are the same language because they happen to use twenty-five out of twenty-six of the letters of their alphabet in common.¹³⁵

In this way, Vaughan Williams is able to deftly draw a commonality between composers of a single nationality as well as show the dissimilarities between composers of different cultures: it is because of the musical language that they speak. In another instance, however, he acknowledges perhaps one of the reasons that music is considered universal – its genuineness. He writes:

Music is indeed in one sense the universal language, by which I do not mean that it is a cosmopolitan language but that it is, I believe, the only means of artistic expression which is natural to everybody.¹³⁶

As the main example for this argument, he cites folk music and its near-omnipresence in the many cultures of the world. It is important to remember though, that Vaughan Williams was writing about nationalism and universality from the perspective of an advocate for a new style of English music. Much of his discussion about universality (or

¹³⁵ Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 1.

¹³⁶ Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 63.

to use another popular term, cosmopolitanism) focuses on making a case for a “natural” style of music which is very strongly rooted in tradition, juxtaposed against an international, and therefore less genuine, style. In response to his critics, who seemed to sense his purposefulness in creating an ‘English’ style, he counters by arguing that “it is surely as bad to be self-consciously cosmopolitan as self-consciously national.”¹³⁷

But there seems to be another alternative available which sacrifices neither authenticity nor appeal: to write in an instinctive, national style, but to address universal themes. Lang notes this by arguing that “the assimilation which leads to real world art takes place when internal form and color are national, but the content is universal.”¹³⁸ This he contrasts with a music which addresses limited, national themes, but is written in a “colorlessly cosmopolitan” style.¹³⁹ There is certainly something to be said for this assessment. The impression gleaned from reading certain texts on English music is that ‘Englishness’ is like a secret club available only to those born into it, and the rest of us can try all we like, but we will never really grasp its meaning and importance. Without a doubt, nationalism has a societal factor to it – its members share certain inherent traits, perhaps even unknown to them, which bind them together. But if only English writers write about English music, and only those English by birth can ever have any hope of truly comprehending it, the future of English music is bleak indeed. For a music culture to flourish it needs not only something that sets it apart, but also something that is relatable. Hence the delicate balance between universal appeal and cultural attribute.

Yet, this all returns once again to the term ‘Englishness’ itself, and the connotations, or lack thereof, implied. Even in the surprisingly explicit characterization

¹³⁷ Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 3.

¹³⁸ Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, 939.

¹³⁹ Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, 939.

of 'Englishness' given by Jill Halstead, there remains no trait that is absolutely English. Modality, rhythmic simplicity, and classical forms were all used by non-English composers, and, if the inconsistency of 'Englishness' is consistent, not used by many 'English' composers. Programmatic music, of which the pastoral is most closely linked with 'Englishness', can also be found in non-English works, and there are many works by English composers which are not pastoral in nature. Britten's Second and Tippett's Third Quartet do not contain the fingerprints of 'Englishness' as maintained by Halstead, are not pieces of distinct Protestantism, and do not appear to be written for the masses (one can never be certain, but the complexity of form in both cases, as well as Tippett's complex writing and tonality, signify an expectation of an educated audience). These pieces also do not have a glaringly 'English' attitude, though this is the most difficult aspect to refute and the most likely to be countered by those within the circle of 'Englishness'. Despite all this, the contradictory and changing nature of the term 'Englishness' still allows these works to be considered as such, alongside a piece such as Vaughan Williams' A Minor Quartet, which does display clear markers of English tradition.

It is curious, though, that the nature of 'Englishness' is supposedly different from generation to generation, yet superficial references to Purcell, a composer nearly 250 years distanced, still insinuate an 'English' component in works of the mid-twentieth century. Other than being born and living in the same approximate geographical location there is really very little to be found in common between these three composers and Purcell, and it is difficult to believe that English culture is so cut off from the rest of the world that it could remain static for two and a half centuries. And indeed this is not the case – arguments of Purcellian inheritance are not based on a similar sound or style or

genre. Rather, it is nearly always the case that the work carries some sort of Purcellian atmosphere, indefinable and therefore indisputable. It seems that more than anything, English music during and after the Second World War, in particular, was coming off of several dozen years of inadequacy and denigration and was desperate for a national champion. As a result, critics favoring an English cultural and musical revival were willing to compromise the definition of 'Englishness' – qualifying some 'English' traits and adopting other universal ones – in order for their most talented and famous composers to become their most 'English' as well.

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